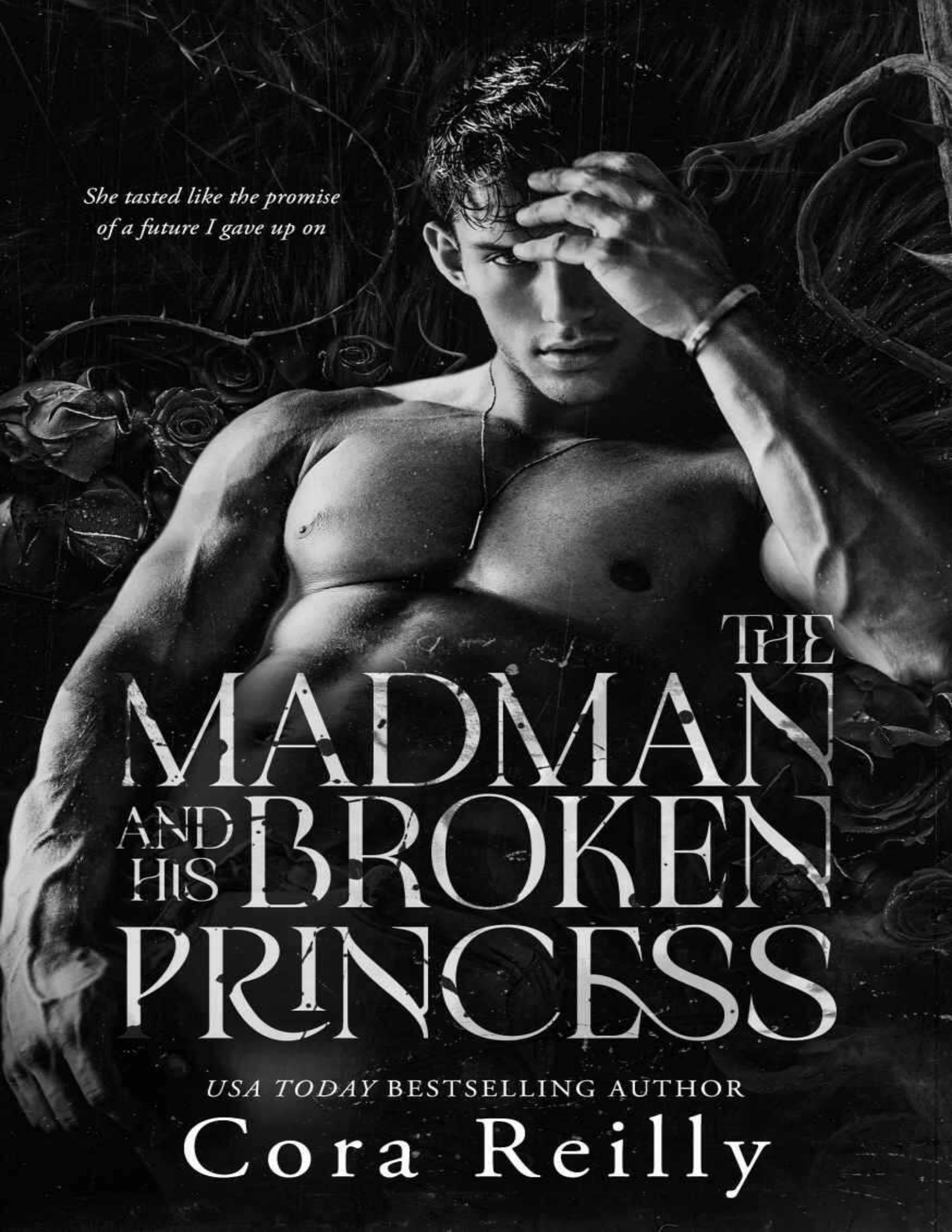
She tasted like the promise
of a future I gave up on
THE
MADMAN
AND HIS BROKEN
PRINCESS
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
Cora Reilly

THE MADMAN AND HIS BROKEN PRINCESS

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The Madman and his Broken Princess
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Author’s Note:

This book is dark, darker than my previous books. Please read the trigger warning if you have certain topics that bother you.

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Trigger Warning:

This book contains torture (gory details included), abuse, deaths, murder, mentioning of suicide, sexwork, mentioning of sexual abuse, desecration of the dead.

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Nestore Romano was achingly beautiful. A cruel, dark prince who only smiled when he could break his broken princess. He was destined to rule over his kingdom. It was his birthright. His indisputable fate until my father betrayed his oath and locked him into a cage to torture and humiliate. It was the end of Nestore. It was his rebirth too. I witnessed both.

He hated my last name for everything my father had done to him and his family. But me…

…me he hated for a single act—running away.

Amelia was the light in my eternal darkness.

Until she wasn't.

Until she betrayed me like every other Lamorgese. I wouldn't let her escape. I couldn't, not when she was the only anchor to something I'd lost. My last salvation.

She would become my wife. The unwilling princess at my side.

I never wanted to make her pay for the scars that her father had left.

No, I would make her pay for breaking my heart.

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CHAPTER ONE

Nestore Romano was destined to rule over his kingdom. It was his birthright. His indisputable fate until my father betrayed his oath and locked him in a cage to torture and humiliate. It was the end of Nestore. It was his rebirth too. I witnessed both. My heart splintered into a million pieces each time.

The first time I met Nestore, he was fifteen, and I was twelve. My father, his third wife, Flavia, and I had been invited to the Romano estate to celebrate Nestore's birthday. The Romano mansion was a sprawling estate on Mount Hollywood, in the midst of Griffith Park, with a jaw-dropping view over downtown LA, Hollywood, and the Pacific Ocean.

If my father hadn't given me a scowl that sent ice through my veins, I would have gawked at the elegant foyer with its sweeping staircase leading up to a grand entry hall with a sixteen-foot-high ceiling forever. The crystal chandelier dangling over our heads alone probably cost more than the average person earned in a year, or ten. Not that anyone invited today knew anything about the worries of ordinary people. The royalty of the Camorra,

the Italian mafia family ruling over the West Coast, had come together to celebrate Nestore's birthday.

The maid, dressed in a long black dress with a white lace apron, motioned for us to wait as she rushed off to get the master of the house. Laughter and soft music drifted down from the upper floor. Several minutes passed in which Father's face reflected his rage over being forced to wait on someone. His ash-brown brows grooved, and his jaw clenched while his mustache gave that impatient twitch that made my heart race.

Romano Senior, as his boss, was one of the very few people who dared to do so, and even that was a thorn in his side. Father thrived on power, and the lack thereof in the presence of Romano Senior would dampen his mood all evening. Flavia's face twisted with anxiety as she glanced my way. She twisted her gold wedding ring around her finger. Her makeup was immaculate as always, except for one tiny spot at her throat, where it revealed the hint of a bruise. I tried to catch her gaze to warn her, but her worry-filled brown eyes kept darting between Father and the space where Romano Senior needed to appear before Father lost it.

I smoothed my fingers down my ball gown, the softness of the silk soothing my nerves. The crimson of the fabric clashed with my strawberry-blond hair, but Father had insisted I wear it, and there was no arguing with him. Not that I'd ever dare to try, even if I favored darker shades of red.

Flavia too was dressed in a sweeping red gown that matched Father's scarlet tie. It was Father's favorite color. Maybe that was why he enjoyed spilling blood so much.

The maid appeared on the winding staircase. "Please follow me upstairs. Master will welcome you in the grand entry hall."

Father stalked ahead as if we were ballast he was glad to leave behind. Flavia and I rushed to follow him, but our long gowns made it difficult.

To my surprise, Father looked moderately calm when Romano Senior and his son Nestore Romano finally stalked into the grand entry hall through huge double doors only seconds after we'd reached this floor. Even at just fifteen, Nestore was almost as tall as his father, who towered over my father at an impressive six feet four. This was the first social gathering I was allowed to attend, and given that it was not only the Romano heir's birthday but also his induction to the Camorra, it was a major honor.

Romano Senior and his son stopped in front of us. My father shook both their hands, wearing a smile I recognized as fake from a mile away. I inconspicuously scanned Nestore. His dark hair was loosely swept away from his face. It looked as soft as silk, a contrast to the sharp angles of his face. His pronounced cheekbones and strong jaw made him look older than fifteen. When his gaze hit me, my belly flipped at the mesmerizing color of his eyes. They were green with flecks of amber brown and impossibly stunning.

“That’s my daughter, Amelia.” My father’s sharp voice tore through my staring, and I ripped my gaze away with heated cheeks. With a charming smile, I shook Romano Senior’s hand, wincing at the force of his grip. I braced myself when I held out my hand for Nestore. While his grip was firm, it didn’t hurt like that of his father’s. He gave me the hint of a smile. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

The bell rang, and a moment later, the maid rushed up the stairs, announcing, “Benedetto Falcone!”

I tensed. Romano Senior and my father sprang to action, rushing down the staircase to greet the Capo of the Camorra in the foyer. Falcone wasn’t a man you let wait or make come up into the entry hall. Flavia hovered near the gallery, which allowed a view down into the foyer, uncertainty filling her gorgeous face. She sent me a quick smile in reassurance before worry clouded her face once more. Nobody liked the prospect of meeting Benedetto Falcone.

Nestore touched my upper arm, drawing my attention to him, and leaned down. “Falcone enjoys breaking beautiful things. I would recommend you stay out of his sight.”

My lips parted, my heart jolting. “My father will be furious if I’m not here to greet the Capo.”

“Your father’s wrath will be worth it,” he said, his eyes straying to the staircase where male voices were coming closer. “Tell him I told you to give this to my cousin Niccolo. You can’t refuse an order from me.” He pushed a gold coin into my hand. I pursed my lips, but he gently pushed me away.

Flavia gave me a confirming nod and mouthed, “Go. Let your father be my worry.”

Despite my fear over my father's reaction, I turned around and rushed away, my ball gown swishing over the marble floor as I followed the sounds of laughter and music into a grand ballroom. Several chandeliers cast their warm light on the gathered guests. Servers carried trays of exquisite canapés, including blinis with caviar, tuna tartar, wagyu tartar, and quail eggs. The Romanos meant to impress.

My gaze scanned the crowd, my pulse whipping in my veins with anxiety. I didn't even know what Niccolo looked like. I had met his father once when he'd visited our home. Eventually, I spotted the man, and next to him was a younger version of him with curly chestnut-brown hair. I made a beeline toward them, even as my belly tightened with apprehension. Niccolo's gaze zeroed in on me, his brows furrowing. I opened my palm with the coin. He said something to his father, who gave a brief nod, then moved away and motioned for me to follow him to a corner of the room.

The moment I reached him, I held out my hand with the coin. "Nestore told me to give this to you."

Niccolo shared his cousin's green eyes minus the amber flecks, but he wasn't quite as tall as Nestore. The lack of a tattoo on his forearm told me he was shy of turning fifteen. I knew they had been born close to each other. Studying family trees was one of the few things I could do in my spare time that my father approved of.

Niccolo narrowed his eyes a fraction, considering me. "It was supposed to bring him luck."

The atmosphere in the ballroom changed, a sudden erratic air taking hold of the guests. My eyes sought the source of the shift until I spotted Benedetto Falcone in the doorway, flanked by my father and Romano Senior, looking like a benevolent king. People greeted him by bowing their heads, their expressions submissive. Falcone's wife hovered a few steps behind him. She looked like she was drugged. His sadistic eyes latched onto woman after woman as if he were looking for a conquest for tonight. He wore a tuxedo, a white shirt with a standing collar, a black fly, and shiny wingtip shoes. His slicked-back black hair rounded off his mobster look.

Nestore appeared beside his father and gestured at his cousin, who grabbed my arm and tugged me away. He shoved me into an alcove, hidden behind a crowd of several men. I wanted to tell him that my father wouldn't

let Falcone hurt me, but I knew better. “Wait here,” Niccolo said, then disappeared. What was I supposed to wait for?

Time dragged on. People danced and ate, laughed and whispered, and I grew bored. Eventually, I ventured out, hungry and thirsty.

After I had filled up on lemonade and appetizers, the sheer volume of laughter and conversations grew too much, so I sought solitude on the expansive balcony overlooking two tennis courts, the vast pool house, and the adjoining pool of a size I’d never seen before. The meticulously kept garden was illuminated by hundreds of spotlights, showcasing the rose garden, fountains, and labyrinth. I gripped the banister, stood on my tiptoes, and leaned forward to catch a better look. What was the maze made of?

“Rare English rambler roses,” said a quiet voice from the dark.

A shriek ripped from my lips, and I lost my balance, tipping forward. An arm slung around my waist, dragging me back from a fall that would have resulted in certain death. I looked up at my savior’s face: Nestore Romano. Mortification heated my cheeks. Even the brisk air chasing up Mount Hollywood couldn’t cool them off.

“You wouldn’t be the first woman to fall to her death from this balcony.” Nestore released me and stepped back, his elbows coming to rest on the banister as he regarded me with mild interest.

I straightened my skirt before I cupped my elbows in my palms to hide their shaking. “You scared me.”

“You didn’t wait.”

“For you?”

His lips thinned. “For things to be safe.”

“When are they ever?” I whispered. With Benedetto Falcone ruling over the West, nobody was safe, least of all women and girls. I was only twelve, almost thirteen, but that was a lesson I’d learned early. I was tall for my age, already five feet five, so many thought I was older for that reason alone. Not that Falcone let age stop him.

Nestore tilted his head to the side, regarding me for a couple of heartbeats before his gaze swept over the premises below. “The maze was my mother’s pride.”

I swallowed as I moved a couple of steps closer. Many rumors centered around the mysterious disappearance of Mrs. Romano six years ago. “Did your mother fall off this balcony?”

Nestore’s head whipped around, surprise crossing his face. Everything about it was regal, beckoning to be immortalized on canvas. “That’s a dangerous question.”

His father would be furious if he knew about my question, and my father would punish me harshly if he found out.

I forced my gaze away from his stormy eyes and focused on the rose labyrinth, wishing I could see it by daylight. “What colors are the roses? It seems like such a romantic place.” I cringed when the words were out.

The bitter twist of Nestore’s mouth suggested he disagreed. Why was I making such a fool of myself?

“White and blush. My mother’s favorite.”

“Beautiful.”

“Can you keep a secret?” Nestore asked in a low voice, leaning closer, his eyes deadly serious.

I swallowed. I carried so many of my father’s secrets that they weighed heavily on my shoulders. I gave a slight nod.

“One night, I was nine at the time, my father chased my mother into the labyrinth, drunk and angry. I followed their screams but got lost in the narrow, dark passages. When I emerged hours later, scratched and exhausted, the sun was rising over my blood-covered father sleeping on the ground in front of the labyrinth.” He paused, and I shuddered, dreading what came next. “My mother never left her labyrinth again.”

“That’s…” I swallowed. I wasn’t a stranger to horrors myself. I didn’t remember how my mother had died. I had been too young, but I vividly remembered finding the beaten corpse of my father’s second wife at seven. I wasn’t sure what to say. Suddenly, the rose labyrinth didn’t look romantic at all. Was Nestore’s mother buried under the roses? I didn’t doubt that his father had killed her.

Nestore nodded as if he had put a name to the horror. “Yeah.” He chuckled. “Benedetto Falcone favors a certain type of man. Men like our fathers.”

I regarded his profile as he kept his gaze trained on the premises and city lights below. “One day you’ll be Underboss under Falcone’s rule.”

He touched the top of his head with a bitter smile. “I can already feel the weight of the crown.”

“You look like you can carry it.”

He straightened to his full impressive height. The way the moon glinted off his dark hair, I could imagine a gleaming crown sitting there, even if the mob didn't adorn their leaders with regalia. He smirked. "Given your father's position, it's not unlikely that you'll be the princess at my side."

I flushed, my pulse picking up. I hadn't been promised yet, not that I knew of at least. That didn't mean my father and Romano Senior hadn't struck a deal. "Maybe we'll know more after my induction at midnight."

He rubbed his thumb over the still unblemished skin of his right forearm. Tonight, he would receive the tattoo of the Camorra: a long knife with an eye near the hilt and the words *Temere me, perché sono l'occhio e la spada* written on the blade. I had never witnessed an induction, and being present when the future Underboss of California received his tattoo was regarded as a major honor, so I wondered whether Nestore was right about us being arranged in marriage.

A photographer with a big, professional-looking camera appeared at the balcony door. "I'm supposed to capture every guest. I don't think I have a photo of you yet."

I shook my head.

"How about I get a photo of you two together?"

Nestore stepped closer, and I peered up at him with an embarrassed smile. He answered with an ironic smile of his own. "What do you think, how many of the smiles in those photos will be honest?"

"None?"

The flash blinded us for a heartbeat, and two more followed before the photographer vanished.

An oversized limousine pulled up the driveway and disappeared from our view. A couple of minutes later, a group of scantily clad women teetered on high heels across the pathway below our balcony.

"I reckon that's the entertainment for after my induction," he said, a sarcastic twist to his lips.

I grimaced. It was a disgusting tradition for boys to lose their innocence with professionals.

Nestore glanced at the watch on his wrist. "Almost time."

Screams shrilled inside the mansion. The little hairs at the nape of my neck rose in response as I flattened myself against the balustrade, my heart jumping in my chest. What was going on? I shot Nestore a fearful look, but

he appeared as shocked as I was. He pulled a knife from a holster at his calf and straightened with the gleaming blade in his fist, then he motioned for me to stay behind him.

He stepped toward the door and peered inside. More screams echoed through the house, reaching a crescendo when the doors on the patio below us slammed open, and a group of guests burst outside. Shots rang out, and one person after another went down.

I pressed up against the wall, my heart pounding in my chest.

“Stay where you are,” Nestore ordered before he ducked into the corridor, disappearing from view. Someone was killing off people. Who was betraying whom? Was this a ploy to overthrow Benedetto Falcone, and if that was the case, who was behind it?

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CHAPTER TWO

Knife clutched in my hand, I followed the sounds of terror to the ballroom, staying close to the wall in case I had to duck for cover. When I arrived at the door and peered inside, my heart sank at the sight that greeted me.

My father knelt on the ground beside my bleeding and motionless uncle. Several bullet wounds littered his torso. My father's and uncle's loyal men lay dead on the ground around them, and the rats who'd betrayed him stood beside Achille Lamorgese. That fucking traitor. Behind them with a glass of red wine in his hand, Benedetto Falcone surveilled the scene with sadistic eagerness. Whatever hope I had left slid out of me. If the Capo approved of the coup, then the chances of my father's survival were low at best, and mine were hardly better.

Fuck, would I die on my birthday? The fingers around the knife handle tightened further. I wouldn't go down without a fight. I'd take as many of these traitorous bastards down with me as I could. I squashed the embers of fear blazing up in me. My father had spent most of my life preparing me for this, for a life of violence, though I doubted even his paranoid mind had seen this coming. Benedetto Falcone was notorious for killing off his men

whenever he felt like they might pose a risk to his reign or simply when he felt like it, period.

I couldn't see Niccolo anywhere. I had to hope that he'd managed to escape and would be clever enough to hide until Benedetto Falcone was dead. His eldest son was rumored to be as insane as his father, but I had never met Remo Falcone or his brothers. They had spent the past few years in a boarding school in England.

I took a deep breath. A hand clamped down on my shoulder. I whirled around to kill whoever restrained me but stopped myself when I came face-to-face with my bodyguard, Eduardo. A tiny piece of quail egg had gotten stuck in his gray-streaked beard. "Don't be stupid, Nestore. Inside this room, only death awaits. You can't save your father. Save yourself so one day you can return and get revenge."

He was right. If I stormed the ballroom, I'd die. My father wasn't a good man and deserved to die. But so did most of the people in my life. I should let him die for everything he'd done to our family, but some twisted part of me couldn't abandon him for the simple fact that he was my father. Fuck.

I slowly shook my head. "I won't run."

Eduardo sighed, the lines in his tanned, weathered face deepening. "You are too loyal to someone who doesn't deserve it."

Shock sliced through me. Eduardo had never talked about my father like that. He wouldn't have lived to see the next day.

"I implore you to leave."

I ripped away from his hold. "This is my home, my territory, and I won't run." I stormed into the ballroom. I would take down as many as I could. All eyes in the room latched onto me, and Benedetto actually laughed and raised his glass as if to mock toast me. Rage bubbled up inside me.

My father watched without a flicker of emotion. He had resigned himself to whatever was to come.

Lamorgese sneered at me as if I were not worth his attention. I switched the knife from my right hand to my left, gripping the blade, feeling the familiar burn of it against my skin. Then I threw it at Lamorgese. He hadn't expected the throw, nor had the men by his side. The blade impaled itself in his left side, below his rib cage. The distance had been too great, and the

switch to my left, slightly less skilled hand, had been a mistake. This injury would hurt but not kill him. He gasped, clasping the knife. Two men came to hold him up as his legs were about to buckle.

An arm clamped around my throat, jerking me to a stop. I couldn't breathe. My eyes began to water.

"Should I kill him?"

I froze and twisted my head until I could peer over my shoulder at my attacker. Eduardo. The man who had just been imploring me not to enter the room. Bile filled my mouth. Was that the taste of betrayal? I'd never tasted anything more vile. I glared up at him with all the hatred I could muster.

He looked away and focused on Lamorgese, who was still busy breathing through the pain. I had hit him hard. I would have smiled if lack of oxygen hadn't made my vision turn dark at the edges.

"It's the Capo's decision," he pressed out as a doctor rushed his way. My knees grew weak, and I would have toppled over if Eduardo's iron grip hadn't kept me upright.

"Death would be too easy, don't you think?" Falcone drawled. He took a sip of his wine, then hit me with a cruel smile.

Eduardo loosened his hold enough so I could breathe, but not enough that I could escape.

After the doctor had given him an injection, Lamorgese straightened and pushed the doctor away, his eyes full of feverish hatred as they settled on me. "You'll spend the rest of your miserable life regretting this." He motioned at the knife sticking out of his side. He turned to my father, who scowled up at him.

"There's a special place in hell for traitors," my father spat.

Lamorgese cackled, then winced and held his side, his skin turning ashen. "We all go to hell, Romano. You'll be happy to know I'll make sure your son's life is pure hell so he comes prepared for what comes after. I don't have time to extend the same courtesy to you. A king has to die so a new one can take his place." Two men jerked my father to his feet, and Lamorgese sliced him open with a gleaming blade from sternum to his pubic bone. For a moment, nothing happened, and my father simply stared in confusion. Then he arched forward, and his bowels tumbled to the floor with a resounding splash.

Bile flooded my mouth in a wave, but I swallowed it down, even as my eyes began to burn fiercely. I wouldn't give any of them the satisfaction of seeing me break, but I couldn't stop useless tears from filling my eyes. I wasn't even sure why. My father had never been good.

A shriek sounded. I turned toward the sound in time to see Amelia bent forward and throwing up my expensive birthday dinner on the hardwood floor. She looked stricken and on the verge of a mental breakdown. She retched again and heaved up bile. Tears streamed down her face as she glanced from the bowels to her father, then to me. Her dress was bloodred, and I was sure Lamorgese had chosen the color intentionally.

I held her gaze.

Had she known about this? Had she overheard her father whisper about the conspiracy? Had she looked into my eyes knowing I'd die tonight?

I'd enjoyed talking to her. She had seemed like one of the few people I knew who wasn't fake. Her smile had felt honest, kind even.

"Kill the rest. Everyone who's loyal to Romano, except for the boy," Benedetto Falcone ordered. "Someone needs to torture the rebellious glint out of him."

Several traitors grabbed the captives, jerked their heads back, and sliced their throats. They killed my uncle, my pregnant stepmother, my aunt, my cousins, and the people I considered allies and friends in that fashion until the gurgling of their blood-filled throats echoed in the ballroom. My only consolation was that I didn't see Niccolo among the dead.

Amelia sank to her knees. She kept her eyes on me as the last gurgles of the dying filled the room, as their bowels covered the floor, and their blood snaked toward us like tentacles. Eventually, the red liquid reached my shoes. Amelia shoved to her feet before the blood could touch her fingers. Her eyes held compassion and horror. I wanted to believe that she was innocent in this, that one person was still alive who hadn't betrayed my family or me.

Eduardo dragged me down into the basement of my home. I had only recently been allowed to set foot into this part of the house. My father had a panic room, a room for questioning, and a vast chamber with several cells down there. The few times I had been allowed to visit the basement, the cells had been empty.

When Eduardo shoved me into one of the cells, my legs caved, and my knees collided with the bare stone floor. Immediately, the stench of old blood, urine, and sweat wafted into my nose. The stench of fear and misery.

I whirled around to face Eduardo and glared up at him. “You filthy traitor.”

“I told you to run. I didn’t want it to end like this, Nestore. Your father, yes, but not you.” He backed out of the cage and closed the door with a clang, then locked it with a key. “There’s nothing I can do for you now.”

“One day, I’ll come for you,” I growled, focusing on the anger simmering in my veins instead of the fear bubbling in my stomach. I wasn’t a stranger to pain. My father was quick to snap and had tried to harden me for a future as Underboss, but deep down, I knew what Lamorgese had planned for me would be far worse.

Eduardo’s sympathetic expression only increased my rage. He nodded as if in farewell. “I hope it ends quickly. Good luck, Nestore. The name Romano will die with you.”

I stumbled to my feet, then toward the bars, clasping them in a tight grip. “What about Niccolo?”

Eduardo glanced over his shoulder at me. “Worry about yourself, not your cousin.” He left, leaving the question hanging between us.

I hung my head, my forehead pressed up against the cool bars.

What a birthday.

A choked laugh erupted from my mouth. I closed my eyes, trying not to lose it completely. I had to figure out a way out of here. I knew every corner of this house. I had to outsmart my guards and Lamorgese.

Or I’d die in agony.

The door to the cellblock creaked open. My muscles tautened in anticipation as I lifted my head from my knees and leaned against the wall, feeling safer with something solid to support my back. My eyes burned from exhaustion. A glance at my watch revealed that it was nine in the morning. Nobody had come for me since Eduardo had dropped me off here eight hours ago. Would the torture begin now? I would have expected Lamorgese to spend longer in the hospital, considering where my knife had hit him, but maybe he wouldn't torture me himself.

It wasn't Achille Lamorgese who entered the cellblock, though. Only his own flesh and blood, also a Lamorgese in name, leaving me wary of her loyalties. She seemed like a kind girl, but after the betrayal I'd encountered yesterday, I wasn't willing to give her the benefit of the doubt, especially not with a father like hers.

She closed the door near soundlessly before she walked over to the gate of my cell. She wore plush red slippers and a long terry bathrobe of the same color that reached her ankles. Despite this, she shivered in the cool basement air, and goose bumps erupted on her skin. Her pale face seemed to glow in the dim light. Shadows spread under her eyes, and the haunted look in them made my pulse pick up. I tried to ignore how dire my situation was, but seeing the blatant concern on her face drove it home.

"Why are you here?" I rasped, my throat scratchy from thirst.

"I'm sorry for what happened. For your loss. For everything."

I only stared. I hadn't allowed myself to mourn my father and uncle yet. When I didn't react, she blinked, then lowered her gaze with a sigh. "I wanted to tell you that I didn't know this was going to happen."

I believed her even though I didn't have a single reason to. Something about her just felt too pure to be deceiving.

Six hours before

I lingered in the grand entry hall, wishing we could finally leave this place. The stench of blood and feces from the spilled bowels was overpowering even here. I wasn't sure how the men cleaning up the ballroom handled it.

I closed my eyes, shuddering. This evening felt like a nightmare come true. I couldn't shake the betrayed look in Nestore's eyes when one of his old bodyguards had dragged him out of the ballroom and down into the basement. I'd overheard a few men discussing the cells situated there. The idea that Nestore was locked up down there made my stomach turn. Maybe I could talk to Father. Nestore wasn't even a grown man yet.

Flavia came floating up the winding staircase, looking ashen. "Is he still in there?"

I nodded. Father hadn't left the ballroom since I'd run out of it two hours ago. Flavia had been lucky enough to be outside when all hell broke loose. "Did you know?" I whispered.

She let out a huff. "I'm a woman."

Steps sounded, and Father emerged from the double doors, holding his side and limping badly.

Both Flavia and I moved to follow him toward the winding staircase where he was heading, but he raised his palm. "You stay here. I'm heading to our hospital."

“Stay here?” Flavia questioned. Father’s hand lashed out, and he slapped her hard. She stumbled back with a gasp and held her cheek. I froze, terrified of making a wrong move. The fury in his eyes was too familiar.

He motioned around us. “You stay here. This is our home now. It’s a mansion worthy of an Underboss. The staff already carried your belongings upstairs to the bedrooms.”

My lips parted in utter shock. Father’s eyes narrowed on me, waiting for a word of protest. I snapped my lips shut and nodded meekly. “What about Nestore? What will happen to him now?”

Father gripped my hair and tore at it, making me cry out. “He’s my prisoner. You will forget he exists, understood?” He jerked my head back hard, making me scream.

“Yes, sir,” I pressed out when I could speak again.

He turned and left. His descent of the staircase was slow, and I didn’t dare move until I heard the sound of the front door closing.

I shook my head in denial. Through the half-open ballroom door, I could still see blood. This place was haunted. I brushed down my hair, but it was a mess.

“You should stay away from your father for a while. He’s very volatile,” Flavia murmured.

I dragged my eyes back toward her. “Are you okay?”

Flavia lowered her hand from her flaming cheek, her shoulders stiffening. “This is nothing.”

I wished it weren’t true.

“I don’t want to live here,” I admitted in a whisper as a couple of cleaners dressed in white bodysuits carrying red-tinged mops walked past us with lowered heads.

Flavia touched my shoulder, her eyes hard. “I know. Neither do I. But our wishes are irrelevant. Let’s go to our rooms and change clothes. Your skirt is soaked with blood.”

My gaze slid down the length of me as dread settled in my bones. Flavia was right. My velveteen shoes and the hem of my dress were encrusted with dried blood. The fabric was a darker red in those spots.

I retched. Flavia clamped her hand around my upper arm and dragged me toward the staircase that led up to the third floor. “We must keep our

countenance. These walls have eyes and ears. We don’t want your father to find out about another moment of weakness.”

I pressed my lips together, forcing the bile down. He had seen me throw up in the ballroom, and his gaze had promised punishment, but so far, he’d been too busy schmoozing Falcone and basking in his triumph to make good on his promise. Was it a weakness to feel sick at this display of brutality?

Goose bumps covered my body as I followed Flavia up the stairs. The maid who had greeted us earlier appeared in the hallway, startling me half to death. I gripped Flavia’s arm tightly.

“I’m sorry for startling you,” she said formally. “I want to inquire if you need help with anything.”

“No,” Flavia clipped, her expression laced with suspicion.

The maid curtsied. “Breakfast will be served at seven as per your husband’s request down in the dining room.”

Flavia nodded, and the maid finally left.

I sank my teeth into my lower lip. We really would live here.

Then another thought struck me. If we lived here, maybe I could find a way to visit Nestore. He certainly needed company and probably food. I couldn’t imagine that prisoners would be treated decently under my father’s rule.

The present

It was strange to see Nestore like this, caged in like an animal, his clothes crumpled, hair a tousled mess. The soiled toilet in one corner of the cell had no walls around it for privacy, with a tiny sink beside it. The entire cellblock smelled rotten, as if something had died down here and been forgotten. My belly tightened at the thought, worrying that the same would happen with Nestore.

I wished I could help him, but I was already lucky I had managed to sneak down here without being caught. I had no clue where the keys were.

I had gotten up at six and hurried downstairs way before breakfast to watch from the landing above what was happening down in the foyer. It had allowed me to observe two of Father's men guffawing as they carried a dog bowl filled with what looked like porridge covered in poo through a heavy steel door. The thought still made me gag. They had emerged shortly after, laughing about Nestore's disgusted expression. But at least I knew where to find the basement entrance.

"Why are you still here? I would have thought you'd be heading home once the party was over." His mouth twisted with bitterness.

I flushed. "My father wants us to make this our new home. He wants us to move in right away." I shuddered thinking of the bodies in the ballroom, of the trails of blood all over the house and gardens. I'd never be able to see this house as anything but a cemetery. But father didn't care about my feelings. He only cared to flaunt his triumph.

Nestore laughed, a jaded, bitter sound. "Of course. A castle for the new king."

I wasn't sure what to tell him. The horrors I'd witnessed last night were still fresh in my mind, but my belly was empty, so I couldn't throw up again.

"Why are you down here? We aren't friends. You hardly know me." Nestore was not being unkind, just curious.

I tensed. He had a point. Before tonight, we had never talked. I gave a slight shrug. "You were kind to me last night, though you didn't have to be. You were in a position of power over me, and I learned early that usually people who are kind to you need to be. People who are above you in the hierarchy are never kind, at least not the people I had met before, but you were…"

Did I make sense? I had no intention of mentioning that I had a little crush on him, and it definitely wasn't why I had risked my father's wrath.

"Do you feel guilty because your father did all this?"

I paused. Did I? "Maybe. But I didn't know."

He nodded. "I believe you. And you don't have to feel responsible for me."

"But I do."

“And I’m fucking glad about it if I’m being honest.”

I smiled at his bluntness.

Nestore pushed to his feet and came toward the bars, then gripped them. His gaze implored me to help him. “I need to escape from here, Amelia. Your father will kill me. He’ll torture me. My only chance is to get out.”

My throat corded up. “I don’t know how. I don’t have the keys, and nobody will hand them to me. My father is still in the hospital, so I’m being left to my own devices.”

“My former bodyguard, Eduardo, has the keys. If you could find him and grab them from him…”

I wasn’t a thief or a sleuth. My father had never taught me to fight, pick a lock, or do anything remotely useful in our male-dominated world. If I got caught trying to steal the keys, Father would punish me harshly. The last time I had contradicted him at the dinner table, he’d whipped me with his belt in front of Flavia and the staff until my ass was red. I couldn’t sit for days. If I betrayed him… I shuddered to think of the consequences I’d encounter then.

But Nestore needed my help.

“It’s okay,” Nestore murmured, his voice heavy with resignation. “I’m asking too much of you. We’re not even friends. I can’t expect you to risk your life for me.”

“My father wouldn’t kill me.”

Nestore’s gaze reflected skepticism.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I can try to put in a good word for you with my father.” That in itself was already risky and would probably not yield results. My word meant little to my father.

Nestore gave me a bitter smile and returned to the spot where I’d found him. He sank to the ground and wrapped his arms around his long legs.

“I could bring you food and water?” I wanted to do something. I didn’t want him to believe that I would support my father.

Nestore chuckled, giving me a sardonic look. “Dying of thirst would be mercy, and you want to take that from me?”

I gaped, not sure what to say to that.

He shook his head, then leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. “That was a joke. I won’t give your father the satisfaction of dying down here.”

“Good,” I said.

He opened one eye with a tired smile, then closed it again.

“I’ll grab something for you to eat.” I took a step back.

“Take the back entrance over there.” He pointed to the end of the cellblock. “That staircase ends behind the kitchen. The staff there can keep their mouths shut. Or did your father kill them?”

“I don’t know.” I hurried down the way Nestore had recommended and found myself behind the kitchen on the first floor. I peered inside. It was the size of a restaurant kitchen, and just as many people were working there. Two cooks, if their hats were an indication, and three helpers who cleaned dishes, prepped veggies and fruits, and washed the pots.

I walked in. My entrance remained undetected due to the sheer volume of noise in the room. I cleared my throat, then again louder. One of the cooks spotted me—a tall, curvy woman in her thirties with long black hair piled into a net at the nape of her neck. “The mistress,” she announced loudly, and silence fell over the room, everyone becoming motionless. I flushed. The staff at our home was equally instructed. My father expected utmost obedience.

“I was looking for some food and water.”

“Wasn’t the breakfast to your liking?” the older cook inquired, concerned.

My skin heated further. I had eaten breakfast with Flavia before I went down to Nestore. Of course, it would look suspicious if I were to want more food so soon after. Next time, I’d have to hide some of my own food for Nestore. This was new to me, and I obviously had some learning to do.

“It was good. I simply crave more,” I said firmly, lifting my chin. I hoped they wouldn’t prod further. I wasn’t a very good eater, but they didn’t know me yet.

“Of course,” the cook said. “What would you like?”

“Pancakes, a stack of them with butter and maple syrup.”

“Bacon?” inquired the younger cook.

I hated bacon, but maybe Nestore liked it. “Yes, please.”

“Where would you like to have your food?”

“Uhhh…” I cleared my throat. “I’ll take it with me to my room.”

“We can bring it up so you won’t have to wait,” the younger cook said as she began to cut slices from a big piece of pancetta.

“I’ll wait here. Thank you.”

They didn’t argue and set out to work. I hovered near the door, wringing my hands, unsure what to do while they worked. One of the helpers, a girl who looked only marginally older than me, set a carafe of water and a glass on a tray. Ten minutes later, a plate with a big stack of pancakes, covered in syrup, pancetta, and butter, followed.

I gave them a grateful smile and picked up the tray, my arms tensing under the weight of it. I gritted my teeth. I had never carried a tray, and it showed. The staff watched me with concern as I crept out, worried I’d drop everything.

It took me forever to descend the staircase to the basement, and by the time I arrived at Nestore’s cell, the pancakes were cold. I pushed the plate into the cell under the bars, but the carafe was too big to fit. I filled a glass with water and handed it to Nestore. He ate a few pancakes and all of the bacon, then hid the remaining food under the bed.

“Thanks for the food.” He came toward the bars and held out his glass. I refilled it, and he downed the water in one gulp.

“It’s the least I can do. Next time, I’ll bring a bottle so you can hide it in your cell.”

“I can drink from the sink. It tastes rotten, but at least I won’t die of thirst.”

“Only of salmonella or legionella,” I muttered.

He cracked a smile. “I’m not convinced that it isn’t worth looking into.”

I didn’t understand how he would still smile. If our roles were reversed, I’d be cowering in the corner, crying my eyes out.

I glanced at my watch. “I have to go. My stepmother told me my father would return around lunchtime. I don’t want to make him suspicious.”

I didn’t mention that I needed to shower and throw my clothes in the laundry. I was too scared that the putrid stench of the basement clung to my skin and fabric, and Father would know what I had done.

Nestore nodded. “Enjoy your new home.”

“You—” I snapped my lips shut. I had almost said “you too” out of habit.

He let out a chuckle. “I’m sure I will.” He looked around the dark, dank cell, then moved toward the narrow bed and sank down.

I felt horrible for leaving him like that. “I’ll be back.”

“I’m counting on it.”
With a last weak smile, I left.

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CHAPTER THREE

I waited for two days before Achille Lamorgese came for me the first time. The halogen lights attached to the wall across from every cell glowed night and day. They didn't reach my cot. Sleep wasn't at the forefront of my concerns, though.

I imagined what I'd do with the shard in my hand. It was from the plate I'd broken for that very purpose. The plate Amelia had given me. I doubted she had even for once second considered what a mere plate could be turned into. My mind always saw the potential for a weapon in everyday objects, something my father had trained me with from an early age.

It was late at night when the heavy door to the cellblock swung open, and Lamorgese entered, followed by Eduardo and three bodyguards. The guards had taken my expensive watch yesterday, so I wasn't sure exactly what time it was.

Lamorgese favored his right side and looked ashen. My knife had definitely done its job.

He stopped in front of my cell, his smile menacing.

“I hope it hurts,” I muttered, faking bravado despite the fear simmering in my veins. I didn’t know what to expect, only that it would be painful. Father had hit me often, sometimes out of anger, sometimes for training, and I had done kickboxing and cage fighting since the age of four. Still, I knew the additional humiliation and helplessness during torture made it much harder to bear. I didn’t want to give Lamorgese the satisfaction of knowing my fear, though.

Lamorgese rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt, revealing arms that hadn’t seen a real fight or gym in a while. “Let’s see how long your arrogance lasts once I carve you up with my knife.”

My stomach roiled with anxiety, but I kept my face unimpressed. Fear was the enemy.

Lamorgese motioned at Eduardo. “Unlock the door and take him to the interrogation room.”

Eduardo hurried to follow the order, unlocking the door and stepping inside. “Get up.”

I stayed where I was, pretending I hadn’t heard him. I wouldn’t make this easy for them.

“Get up now!” Eduardo hissed, glancing at Lamorgese cautiously.

“I’m good where I am.”

Eduardo was by my side in two long strides and reached for my arm. My fingers around the shard tightened. Launching up, I rammed it into the side of his throat with full force. He stumbled back with wide eyes, clutching his throat and making choking sounds. His horrified gaze moved to Lamorgese as if he hoped the asshole would jump to help him. Eduardo was replaceable. Lamorgese wouldn’t shed a single tear over his demise.

“Grab him and watch out for weapons!” Lamorgese barked at the other men. I curled my fingers around another shard, thankful again for the plate Amelia had used to bring down my food.

Eduardo stumbled back until he hit the bars, then he sank down, gasping like a fish and trying to form words.

I didn’t feel an ounce of pity or regret. The three other men stormed the cell at once and ambushed me. I shoved to my feet when they were close enough and managed to slam the second shard into the shoulder of one of them before a fist collided with my face, knocking me back. More hits followed until I was disoriented, and blood filled my mouth. Brutal hands

ripped my arms behind my back and tied them together, then two of them dragged me out of the cell past a furious Lamorgese.

“Go to our doctor and take him with you,” Lamorgese muttered, nodding toward Eduardo, who didn’t look like a doctor would be of much use anymore. The amount of blood that soaked his shirt and pants likely made up half of his body’s supply.

I was carried out of the cellblock into a room that my father had used for questioning in the past. The two assholes strapped me to a metal chair bolted to the concrete floor and checked that I was secure before Lamorgese appeared before me with a self-indulgent sneer.

“I’m wondering where you got the shards from? They remind me of the plates I get my food served on…” He narrowed his eyes. “Curious thing.”

“Maybe the last prisoner forgot them in my cell,” I said with a smirk.

His fist smashed into my nose, followed by a sickening crunch of bone breaking. I let out a muffled groan as pain spread in my face. Blood filled my nose and trickled down my throat, forcing me to swallow. Breathing became difficult, so I sucked in air through my open mouth.

“Who gave you that plate?”

“I got the delicious rotten sandwiches decorated with feces on that fancy plate.” I had flushed it down the toilet. Thanks to Amelia’s provisions, I hadn’t been tempted by hunger. Though more than two days would have to pass without eating for me to touch shit-covered food.

Lamorgese backhanded me even harder, whipping my head to the side. My neck ached from the sudden motion, and my head rang with the beginning of a headache. It was still nothing I hadn’t experienced before.

He walked over to a small table with utensils and picked up a pair of rusty pliers. “I’ll ask again nicely. Who gave you the plate?”

“You’ll torture me whether I tell you or not. Let’s have some fun first,” I muttered, even as my stomach coiled with terror at what might come next. Pliers had multiple uses during torture, and I would be submitted to at least one of them very soon.

I tried to focus on something else, an image inside me to keep me anchored, and as usual, a scene between my mother and me on my bed, reading a book before bedtime, came to mind.

When Lamorgese’s soldier gripped my hand, a memory of my mother’s soft voice played in my head, but the fantasy faltered as excruciating pain

erupted in my finger. It didn't stop. More pain followed. I wasn't sure for how long. It felt like an eternity. When Lamorgese finally let up, my throat ached from screaming. I hadn't been able to stay silent. Through blurry eyes, I risked a look at my hands. They were covered in blood. All five of my fingers were missing a nail.

My stomach roiled with a wave of nausea that I had trouble containing.

"Look at me," Lamorgese barked.

I raised my head, swallowing hard. He still held the bloody pliers in his hand. The sight sent a new wave of fear through me. I focused on the spittle clinging to one end of his ugly mustache.

"If you tell me who gave you the plate, I won't pull out your other nails, Nestore. Be wise." He sounded almost fatherly. I knew better than to trust that voice, though I simply wanted the pain to stop.

"It was Eduardo. He's known me all my life. He felt guilty."

Lamorgese's smile hardened. He smoothed his mustache. "Did he? Is that why you stabbed him? Is that how you repay someone who helps you?"

"He betrayed my family, and it's how I treat traitors."

"Problem is, I can't question him anymore, can I?"

I didn't say anything. My eyes were locked on the pliers Lamorgese slowly raised before me. I began to tremble.

"You said you wouldn't go on if I told you, and I did."

"Maybe you did, or maybe you lied. It's for me to find out. But you're right. I'm a man of my honor." He handed the pliers to the other man. "I won't keep going, but he will."

I ripped at my bindings as the man approached me with the pliers. Then my world became painful again.

The questioning continued eternally. That was what it felt like, but I didn't reveal the truth.

If I told Lamorgese that Amelia had brought food down to me, he would punish her, and I would lose the only person who might be my friend. The idea was unbearable. When they dropped me on the floor of my cell later, I stayed exactly where I was. My fingers were stiff from bruising, the pain still very prominent but getting better to handle. My face was swollen, and my ribs ached.

How was I supposed to survive days or weeks like this? What if weeks turned to months?

I waited anxiously on the upper landing, looking down at the floor below, hoping my father would emerge from the basement soon. The steel door was soundproof, so I couldn't hear what was going on, but I worried he was hurting Nestore.

When Father finally came out and crossed the foyer below, my belly dropped. Blood covered his white shirt, and he was wiping his hands with a cloth. What if he'd killed Nestore?

My pulse sped up, my belly clenching so tightly I worried I'd throw up. I bounced on my heels, driven by the need to check on him, adrenaline making me almost lightheaded.

Father's steps came closer as he ascended the staircase. I hid behind the library door, which was dark since it was night.

I held my breath when Father's heavy steps passed the door and moved up the next staircase, then waited for the bang of his bedroom door before I dared to peek out. The hallway was cloaked in darkness. Only light from below allowed my eyes to make out my surroundings. My heartbeat hammered in my chest as I crept out into the hallway, then down the sweeping staircase.

I carried a bag with food, water, and a book for Nestore. I wasn't sure what he liked to read, or if he liked to read at all. But life in the cell must be boring, so I wanted to help him keep his spirits up.

When I snuck down the narrow staircase to the basement, my breathing was shallow. It didn't even allow me to extend my arms all the way without touching the rough concrete walls. I didn't know if a guard was stationed down here. It seemed unnecessary given that no one was getting out of those cells without the keys.

The moment I reached Nestore's cell, my body froze with pure fear. Nestore lay on the floor, curled into himself. He wasn't moving.

I gripped the bars, licking my cracked lips. "Nestore?" I whispered.

He didn't move. One of his hands rested on the floor outstretched. It was covered in blood. Blood splatters also dotted the floor from where he lay to the basement door. Heat pressed against my eyes. "Nestore?" I whispered louder.

"Nestore!" I snapped my lips shut as my voice echoed in the dank chamber. Nestore stirred, then rolled onto his back.

I gasped, my heart jolting. The left side of his face was entirely swollen, his eye a black-and-blue bump and crusted shut. His other eye opened, and for several moments, he merely stared up at the ceiling, his chest rising and falling slowly before he rotated his head toward me. He grimaced. "Hey, Amelia." His voice was rough. From screaming? The thought made me want to wail.

"I…" I cleared my throat. "I brought you food and a book."

"I'm not sure I'll be able to read tonight. My head is spinning."

I nodded, my chin wobbling. "Yeah. You look…you look really—" I wasn't sure what to say. He looked like hell, like my father really wanted to kill him.

"This is nothing." He pushed into a sitting position, his expression tightening with pain. He moved his hands stiffly and kept them hanging limply at his sides the moment he stood. When he moved to the bars, I finally got a good look at his hands and immediately wished I hadn't. He didn't have any fingernails. Left were swollen nail beds and half-moon-shaped wounds. My belly dipped with a heave, but I quickly swallowed.

Nestore leaned the less beaten-up side of his face against the bars and smiled, or at least he tried, but the swollen side didn't move properly, so it looked like a grotesque grimace.

"I wish…" I felt a wave of immense guilt. I wished I could help him, not just with food or books.

“Yeah, me too.” He motioned at the bag. “Let’s see what you got.”

I pulled out a couple of bananas, a protein bar, and a small pack of chips. “The cook threw away the food before I could pack some for you. I’m sorry.”

He ate the bananas first, then handed me the peel. “It’s better if you bring me stuff that doesn’t leave a trace. Your father noticed the plate you brought down here last time.”

I could feel the color drain from my face. I hadn’t even thought about that. “I’ve never done this before.”

“Me neither,” he said. Was he really joking?

When he had eaten everything that I’d brought and handed the packaging back to me, we settled on the floor.

“The staircase creaks when they come down here. You can hide in time,” Nestore told me when I glanced at the cellblock door for the hundredth time.

“Here.” I handed him the book I’d picked. It was a fantasy book with dragons. He took it without checking it, then took a few gulps from the water bottle.

“I’m praying that this will be over soon.”

“There are only two ways this can end. With me dead or with your father dead.”

Two weeks later, I could barely contain my excitement as I headed down to the basement to Nestore. My father had left that morning, so as soon as my homeschooling was done, I hurried downstairs.

Nestore’s face looked better. He had a new cut on his lower lip, and the way he moved suggested he had other bruises and injuries on his body, but it wasn’t anything as obvious as the first time my father had tortured him. “I know why my father was so busy in the past few days.”

Nestore raised his eyebrows as he eagerly dug in. Today, I had a container with penne all’arrabbiata for him.

“I overheard the guards talking today. They said Benedetto Falcone was killed by his own enforcer.” I grinned, feeling giddy with the possibilities.

Nestore stopped eating and put the container down, hope lighting up his face. “Growl? Are you sure?”

“That’s what they said. My father wasn’t at the dinner table, so I couldn’t ask him, but he’s tripled the guards.”

Nestore’s brows snatched together as he absentmindedly rubbed his left rib.

“Maybe a new Capo will improve things,” I said.

“Maybe,” Nestore agreed, looking more alive than I had seen him since his capture. “But it’ll be a while until his influence reaches California. His son, Remo, is too young.”

“Rumor has it nobody knows where he or his brothers are anyway.”

Nestore perked up, his brows furrowing further. “Several forces will fight for the position of Capo of the Camorra, and eventually, he’ll be one of them. It’s in his blood.”

That was what I had feared. “Do you think my father will be among them?” The idea that Father could become even more powerful terrified me. He’d be as bad as Benedetto, and Nestore’s fate would be sealed.

Nestore’s shoulders stiffened, a flicker of fear passing his face before he masked it. “He’ll try.”

“I don’t think he’ll be successful.”

Nestore didn’t say anything. He finished the food and then leaned back with a deep frown. He pushed up the sleeves of his shirt, and my belly dropped. The bruises, cuts, and burns on his arms made my chest ache for him. What did he go through while I was comfortable upstairs?

The moment my birthday party was over, and the guests were gone, I snuck downstairs with a huge piece of my chocolate cake. Father had gone to bed completely shit-faced, and the staff was busy cleaning up after the crowd, so nobody paid me any attention.

Nestore’s eyes widened when he spotted me in my blush-colored ball dress.

He pushed to his feet and came toward the bars. “What—” He snapped his lips shut. “Your birthday?”

I nodded. I hadn’t told him about the party. I had felt too horrible talking about something like that when Nestore’s last birthday had ended in a nightmare, and he’d been locked inside a cell for two months. Having to celebrate in the very ballroom so much blood had been spilled not too long ago had been a horrid experience I didn’t wish to repeat.

“Thirteen?” he asked.

“Yeah. I brought cake for you.” I took out the container with the chocolate cake and handed it to Nestore, who took it hesitantly.

“Happy birthday,” he said quietly, his eyes forlorn. “I don’t have a present.”

“You being alive is a present.”

He opened the container and ate the cake in silence.

“Do you like it?” I asked, unable to bear the silence any longer. Seeing Nestore eat cake in the dirty, cold cell made me desperately sad.

“It’s delicious.” He let out a sigh. “Sometimes I wish you wouldn’t still give me glimpses of good things in life like delicious food. Sometimes I just want to drown in the darkness down here.”

I gripped the bars. “Don’t give up. Promise me. We’ll find a way to get you out.”

He nodded, but he didn’t look convinced.

I wanted to distract him from his captivity. “Tell me about your favorite memory.”

He was silent for a long time. When he finally spoke, I had already given up hope for an answer. “My mother used to read me the same book every night. I loved it and couldn’t fall asleep without it. No matter what my father did to her, she always came to my bed and read me *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*.”

I perked up. “Maybe I can find the book for you. Is it in the library?” I hoped it was. Father had removed everything from Nestore’s room and burned it.

Nestore shrugged. “I don’t know. The day my mother died, the maid took it out of my room, and I never asked for it again.”

I swallowed hard. “Do you want me to look for it?”

Nestore gave me a small smile. “Yeah.”

I gave a resolute nod. “I’ll do it tonight and bring it to you tomorrow.”

“What about you? Do you have a favorite memory of your mother?”

My face became taut. “No, at least I don’t think it’s a memory. I was only two, too young to remember anything, but sometimes I dream of a woman singing a lullaby, and I see my mother’s face.”

“The subconscious is powerful. It might be a deeply buried memory that your mind can only access during sleep.”

“I like to think it is,” I said with a soft smile, then pushed to my feet. “I’ll be back with *The Tale of Peter Rabbit,* okay?”

“Okay.”

I left the basement and made a beeline for the library door, which was in the corridor behind the ballroom. The oak door creaked when I pushed it open and snuck in. I spent plenty of time in this room, so nobody would be surprised to find me here, even at night.

My eyes caught on a stack of photos on the desk in front of the window. Those hadn’t been there this morning. I moved over to the desk and froze. These were photos from Nestore’s birthday party. The top photo showed Flavia in her bloodred dress standing behind Father as he chatted with Benedetto. I quickly rummaged through the photos until I found a photo of Nestore and me on the balcony. Nestore was more than a head taller, and we were smiling at each other. I folded the photo and slipped it into my neckline, then checked the other photos, but stopped when the first images of executions appeared. Had Father really made the photographer capture the brutal murders?

I grimaced and backed away from the desk, then focused on the task that had brought me here in the first place.

I scanned the shelves for one with children’s books, but only found one with fables and fairy tales. Old leatherbound books lined the shelves, nothing that usually spoke to a child. I ran my finger over the spines in search of the right one. I had almost given up hope when I found the small, thin book at the end of the shelf. I took it out with a grin. Something fluttered to the ground. A photograph of a young Nestore, maybe six or seven years old, standing beside a beautiful, tall woman with dark hair and

huge green eyes. She wore a long blush-colored dress and had an arm wrapped around her son.

I picked up the photography and hid it in the book. My father destroyed every photograph and all the Romanos' personal belongings, so this could very well be the last photo of Nestore's mother.

The house was quiet when I stepped out of the library. The staff was probably done cleaning the ballroom or took extra care to be quiet so they wouldn't wake my father and encounter his wrath.

With the book clutched against my chest, I hurried downstairs. Nestore shoved to his feet when I entered the basement.

"I didn't expect you to be back tonight," he said as he curled his hands around the bars.

I lifted the book with a smile, then held it out to him. He froze before he took it as if it were breakable.

"I found a photo inside."

He opened the book, and his face softened with wistfulness as he looked down at the image of his mother and himself. He swallowed audibly before he took it out. Then he held the book out to me.

I shook my head with a frown. "It's for you."

"I know. Can you read a couple of pages to me?"

My chest tightened. "Of course."

I took the book and sank to my knees. Nestore sat against the wall, the photo propped up against his raised legs.

I began to read. "Once upon a time, there were four rabbits, and their names were—Flopsy, Mopsy, Cotton-tail, and Peter."

Nestore closed his eyes, and I kept reading.

Ten minutes later, Nestore opened his eyes. "Thanks. That's enough for tonight. Can you read me more tomorrow?"

I gave a slight nod, my throat too tight for words. I slid the book through the bars and Nestore took it. Then he hid both the book and the photograph under his bed.

He sank down on the bed. "It's late. You should go to bed before someone catches you."

"Sleep tight," I said, moving toward the stairwell.

"I don't know if I would want to survive without you. Thank you for helping me."

I froze. “You don’t have to thank me.” I slanted him a look over my shoulder. He was looking down at his legs. “I need you to survive.”

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CHAPTER FOUR

Two years later

I sat cross-legged across from Nestore. We often sat right at the bars so we could be close while talking. I could count the days I hadn't visited Nestore in the past two years on two hands. I talked to him more than anyone else, mostly about mundane things like my private teachers, the news, and gossip I overheard. I was his link to the outside world, and he'd become the center of mine. I felt safe talking to him.

It was the weekend, so I didn't have school, but I still got up early to see Nestore before breakfast. His hair was a little tousled from sleep, a sight I always particularly enjoyed. He ate the buttermilk biscuits and chicken drumsticks I'd snuck away from dinner yesterday. "Sorry I couldn't make it last night. Father insisted I play the piano for him and Flavia in the ballroom."

"I always hated piano lessons," Nestore said, then ripped off a chunk of meat from the cold drumstick. He had mentioned it to me before, but I still loved to imagine him sitting at the piano.

“I wish I could hear you play. I love listening to the piano, but I don’t like to play myself.”

Nestore chuckled. “Same.”

“Maybe we would enjoy playing together.”

Nestore’s expression stilled, and shame washed over me. When would Nestore ever get the chance to play the piano again? I had lost hope that my father would ever let him go.

Nestore smiled, but it was a little tight. “You’d outplay me. I haven’t played in almost three years, and the scar tissue on my fingers probably makes them less nimble.”

“Why did you stop playing?” It was a topic we had discussed before. There probably wasn’t a topic we hadn’t spoken about in the hundreds of hours we’d spent talking, except for what happened in the torture chamber.

“Fight training and lessons on the business side of being an Underboss took up too much time.”

I nodded. Of course, Nestore had been prepared for his future tasks. I had ballet and piano lessons, so I’d be graceful and entertaining for future social gatherings.

The steel door slammed shut, and footsteps hurried down the staircase.

I froze.

“Hurry. You need to hide,” Nestore hissed as he hid the plate and the chicken bones under his cot. I scrambled to my feet and dashed into one of the open cells, then hid between the cot and the toilet. The spot was entirely dark and would keep me hidden.

“They could be bringing a new prisoner,” Nestore growled, but it was too late for me to hide somewhere else. I could only pray it wasn’t the case. Nestore had been the only prisoner down here for almost six months.

My father stepped into view, followed by two of his men. He wore a tracksuit, a rare sight. They didn’t have a new prisoner with them, which meant they had come for Nestore. Fear gripped me. It wasn’t the first time I was down here while Nestore got tortured. I pressed even closer against the wall, hoping the darkness would hide my presence.

The stench so close to the toilet twisted my stomach. Old urine, poo, and vomit created a potent odor that made my eyes water. I breathed through my mouth, terrified anyone would hear me.

Nestore rose to his feet. His face was proud and stubborn, but his hands were shaking. He was scared.

I wished I could help him.

“Grab him. I don’t have much time today, so we have to make it worthwhile. I have been too busy to visit you in the past few days, so we have some catching up to do.”

Nestore stiffened. The taller guard unlocked the door and gripped Nestore by the upper arm, dragging him outside, while the other pointed a gun at Nestore.

My pulse raced in my veins. I wanted to help. Nestore’s eyes flitted to me, and he gave a slight shake of his head as he was dragged away toward another door that led to the torture rooms I had never seen.

I didn’t move. I’d wait here until Nestore was back, no matter how long it took.

An agonized scream rang out, making me whimper in response. I tried to shut down my mind so it wouldn’t imagine what Nestore went through. Maybe it was cowardly, but I couldn’t even bear the thought of it.

The moment Nestore’s screams subsided always scared me the most because I never knew if it meant the torture was finally over or if Nestore had perished.

I remained hiding in the shadows of the open cell with bated breath, waiting for my father and the other men to emerge from the torture cell. The heavy door creaked open, and two men walked into the cellblock, dragging something by the arms. Nestore was motionless. Cold fear spiked. But they wouldn’t bring him back here if he were dead, right? They’d take him to a place where they could dispose of his body. Tears stung my eyes.

I had to figure out a way to save Nestore. I simply didn’t know how. My father kept the key on his body at all times, and so did the guards.

The two men locked Nestore’s cell, then went to the steel door, which fell shut with a resounding bang as they left. My father had probably gone

upstairs after he was done torturing Nestore. I shoved to my feet, my heart beating in my throat, and left the cell. Trembling, my pulse galloping in my veins, I crept down the long corridor toward Nestore's cell. It had been his prison for too long. I held my breath when I faced his cell, searching the dark for a sign of Nestore. My eyes caught on the blood trail leading from the steel door to the cell entrance, then beyond it into the dark. A single hand reached the area illuminated by the wall lamps. It didn't stir.

"Nestore?" I whispered. Nothing. What if Nestore didn't wake? What if today was the day he succumbed to the torture? I had lost count of the times I'd thought Nestore was dead. More often than not, he was closer to death than life when Father or his men were done with him.

"Nestore?" I said louder, despair tightening my airways. His fingers twitched, then curled. I sucked in the breath I hadn't realized I was holding. Nestore flattened his hand on the stone, then his second hand appeared in the beam of light. That one was a bloody mess. His knuckles were swollen and burned, his fingers covered in blisters. Burns were always the worst to treat. It was a miracle that Nestore hadn't died of sepsis yet.

I shuddered, a wave of nausea taking hold of me. He pushed himself to his hands and knees and crawled toward the bars, where he collapsed. He rolled over onto his back, revealing a swollen face and a busted lip. His chest was littered with burn marks from what looked like cigarettes. I reached through the bars and lightly touched a spot on his shoulder that looked fine. "It's over." I bit my tongue. It wasn't. Far from it. Not if I didn't find a way to free Nestore from this hell. In the time since his capture, my father had beaten me up a couple of times for inquiring about Nestore. If he found out I had done more than that, he'd probably ship me off to a boarding school, and nobody would be here to help Nestore. Flavia had made it clear she wouldn't risk her life for him, even if she kept my secret.

I took a small bottle of water and painkillers from the purse slung over my shoulder. I always bring it down here with me these days. My father got increasingly annoyed by my constant headaches, but if this lie meant I could alleviate a tiny part of Nestore's pain, then I'd keep doing it. Flavia often gave me her painkillers, too.

I popped two pills into Nestore's mouth, then touched the bottle to his lips. He parted them and gulped down some of the liquid, including the

painkillers. I leaned my cheek against the cool bars, keeping my eyes trained on Nestore, who didn't open his eyes. He remained motionless except for the shivers that wracked his body. His skin felt hot. My father hardly ever let a doctor treat Nestore's wounds, only when it was necessary to prolong Nestore's suffering. Father didn't want him dead—yet.

I couldn't reach *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, which was hidden under Nestore's cot, but I didn't need the book. I had read the book so often to Nestore that I knew it by heart, so I began to recite the first page word for word, hoping it would soothe Nestore.

Nestore finally stopped shaking. The fever had subsided. I feared nothing more than losing Nestore. What if he died without ever seeing the sky again?

"Don't die. I want you to experience beauty again," I whispered thickly, despair clogging my throat.

Nestore opened his eyes. Those green-amber irises made my heart jump as they always did. "If I die today, it'll be in the presence of true beauty."

I swallowed, my vision swimming with tears. This was probably still the fever talking. "Don't die."

"I won't," he croaked. "I won't ever leave you, Amelia. Together forever."

"Together forever. I won't ever leave you."

Nestore smiled and extended an arm through the bars. I kissed the palm, then pressed it against my chest right over my heart. "This beats for you."

"I often dream about kissing you."

I exhaled. I wanted nothing more, but I had always wished for our first kiss to happen outside of these godforsaken walls, in freedom where our love could truly blossom. "All my firsts are yours," I promised. It was a promise I wasn't sure I could keep. I had three years until I had to marry, unless my father decided to give me away before I was of age… Right now, he kept me as bargaining material.

Nestore closed his eyes briefly with a blissful smile. When he looked at me again, the longing in his gaze made me press myself against the bars, the cold steel caging in my cheeks. Nestore struggled into a sitting position, pain etched into every stunning line of his face. He gripped the bars with bruised fingers and pulled himself closer to me. He looked closer to death than life. "All my firsts are yours too," Nestore rasped. As a man in our

world, Nestore would already have lost all his firsts a long time ago if my father hadn't locked him in a cage like an animal to humiliate and torture him.

Nestore leaned forward and pressed his lips against my cheek, the touch so gentle and sweet, I wanted to cry. How could he still be this good after what had been done to him?

The door to the basement swung open, and my father stepped in with two of his men before Nestore and I could pull apart. He held one of his pet chimps, the female, dressed in a checkered dress, by a leash. Father's face twisted with disgust and utter rage. He shoved the leash at one of his men and stormed toward me. He had changed out of his tracksuit and now wore a business suit.

"Don't—" I wanted to beg Father to spare Nestore his rage, but his palm struck my mouth, leaving blood in its wake. I fell to the floor, my ears ringing, my lip throbbing, and blood pumping into my mouth. I retched at the potent taste. The chimp let out screeches and hoots that echoed in the basement and raised the little hairs on my neck.

Cruel fingers tangled in my hair and wrenched me upward. I scrambled to get on my feet to stop the burning pain in my scalp, but Father didn't give me the chance as he dragged me toward the steel door.

"Don't hurt her! Hurt me! I tricked her into kissing me!" Nestore roared.

I was sobbing from the pain in my scalp, but still managed to shake my head. "No."

"You'll get your turn, Nestore. Don't worry. I'll be back for you later," my father snarled as he opened the steel door and wrenched me through it. I stumbled after him up several flights of stairs until we reached my room. He tossed me inside, and I fell to my knees, pain shooting through my knees and up my legs. Relief filled me as the pain in my scalp subsided. With watering eyes, I looked up to see my father remove his belt. "I was far too lenient with you. That ends today. I don't care if I have to give you a lashing every day until your skin peels off your bones." Before I could utter a single word, he lashed out with the belt, and it whipped against my upper arm. I cried out in pain, backing away, but he followed, and the hard leather hit me again and again—my arms, my legs, my back. My face was the only place he spared, and I knew why. He wanted to marry me off to another

Underboss. I wasn’t blind. I had seen the looks the men who visited us gave me, and it creeped me out. I needed a pretty face for that.

I half wished he’d leave scars on my face to be spared a future at such a man’s side. Nestore wouldn’t care about a few scars. Strike after strike rained down on me until my world was pain, and sweet oblivion eventually overcame me.

I woke in my bed. Every inch of my body ached, and my skin felt too tight, as if it were on the verge of bursting. Whimpering, I opened my eyes to find Flavia perched on the bed beside me, her brows tugged tight with worry. “Finally,” she said and blew out a breath. Her makeup was done to perfection, several layers of professional foundation covering up the bruises on her cheek and throat. “He’s never beaten you this badly.”

I tried to sit up but gave up at the intense pain in my back, arms, and legs. The last time I’d gotten a beating almost this bad, I had asked him why he kept torturing Nestore.

“You’re bruised all over. It’s a good thing it’s winter. That way, we can cover the marks with clothes. Even my makeup wouldn’t be able to cover everything.”

I tilted my head and glanced down at my arms. They looked like a painting of modern art. Different shades of blue and purple, and the occasional streak of red where my skin had burst open. Flavia wrung out a cloth and put it against my forehead. The cold felt good against my skin.

“Why did he punish you like that?” she asked.

“Nestore kissed my cheek.”

Shock crossed her beautiful face. She was only twenty-five and had already survived seven years with my father. Pregnant with his heir, maybe she had a chance to survive even longer. Her eyes crinkled with sympathy.

“He shouldn’t have done it!”

“I wanted him to.”

The disapproval in her face would have made me angry if there weren't worry in her eyes.

"Do you know if Nestore is okay?" Fear filled me like a flash flood. If my father had punished me like this, Nestore must be at death's door.

"I didn't see them carrying out any body bags."

I swallowed. I had to hope that meant Nestore was alive.

I tried to sit up again, and this time I managed, driven by sheer determination and worry.

Flavia lightly touched my arm. "I understand the wish for love, Amelia, but in our world, we as women only experience love from our children." She stroked over her bump. Her first child. Or the first she'd hopefully carry to term.

I swallowed hard. "I love Nestore."

"You're young."

"Not too young to love."

"Fifteen. So young," she said as if the word was a stranger, when she wasn't even that old. But living with my father, she probably felt ancient.

"I wish I could help him. I wish I could run off with him."

Her gaze jerked toward the door as if she worried my father would burst in. "Be careful," she murmured. "Next time, he might not stop."

I knew my father was capable of killing me, especially now that he had a boy on the way. The only reason he tolerated me at all was the chance of marrying me off to another powerful man to solidify his own power. Perhaps even to Benedetto's oldest son, Remo, who was killing off high-ranking Camorrista in his quest to become Capo. I was bargaining material he didn't want to lose. "Don't you ever wish you could run away. To save yourself and the baby?"

Flavia's eyes gave me the answer she didn't dare to say aloud. Her fingers curled around the fabric of her dress, knuckles turning white.

I considered asking her to help me get the key for Nestore's cell, but she was pregnant, and I wasn't sure my father wouldn't beat her and the unborn child to death, heir or not, if she went behind his back. Two of her pregnancies, both with girls, had ended early because of his temper. He found a pregnant belly disgusting, so it enraged him. That was why my mother, his second wife, and even Flavia hadn't managed to give me a sibling yet.

I dragged my legs out of bed. Someone had dressed me in a nightgown. “How long was I out?”

“Three hours.”

“Thanks for taking care of me.”

She nodded with a small smile and rose to her feet, her thin hand coming to rest on her protruding belly. “I would tell you to stay away from Nestore, but I can see in your eyes that you won’t. Just be careful.”

“I will be. Don’t worry.”

She left, and I put on a cardigan and slippers before I snuck out. Every step caused a ripple of pain in my entire body, making me stop and suck in a sharp breath. It took me a while to reach the basement, shuffling my feet over the floor to avoid the worst pain in my thighs.

Anxiety sloshed in my stomach when I opened the emergency exit door and snuck into the cellblock. I sped up despite the ache in my body, desperate to see Nestore. I found him sitting on the ground with his back against the neighboring cell. The moment he spotted me, he shoved to his feet and rushed toward the bars, grasping them in a white-knuckled grip. His eyes scanned me from head to toe, his face displaying rage and despair. I wished I had covered up my legs and collarbones, the only skin I was showing.

“One day, I’ll make him suffer for everything he’s done.”

I smiled shakily and grasped the bars below his hands, our skin brushing. “I’m okay,” I lied. “What did he do to you?”

Nestore shook his head. “Nothing yet. But imagining him hurting you was torture. I was so worried he’d kill you.”

I gave a small shrug, then winced. “Not yet.”

It was meant as a joke, but Nestore pressed his forehead against the bars with a look of feverish anguish. “Don’t risk your life for me.”

“I won’t stop coming down here. And I’ll find a way to get you out of here.”

Nestore closed his eyes briefly, then gave me a bitter smile. “You’re the reason I’m still alive.”

“I’ll get you out of here.”

“Only if you come with me,” he murmured.

“Of course.”

My father had always been distrustful, but since becoming Underboss, he had become downright paranoid. He didn't trust me to begin with, and even less so since he'd witnessed the kiss. In the weeks that followed the incident and the beating, I tried to get back in his good graces. Still, it became more difficult to visit Nestore in the basement. Guards patrolled the cellblock more often than before.

I needed to figure out a way to free Nestore before things got even worse. For me to get close enough to my father to steal the keys to the cell without him noticing required a miracle. My best bet was one of the guards. They, too, were wary, but if I pretended to flirt with them, maybe they'd lower their guard. Since I'd developed some curves, I'd noticed the stares from my father's men.

I put on a dress that was a little too tight by now, revealing more leg and neckline than I was comfortable with, but it was perfect for my purposes. My belly burst with nerves as I left my room in search of the guards.

Flavia came out of the bedroom at that moment. She took one look at me, and her expression tightened. She grabbed my arm and tugged me into her bedroom. She and my father didn't sleep in the same room. They only shared a bed when they were intimate, a thought that made me feel very sick. Though he now mostly favored his mistresses and whores because Flavia had a belly.

"What are you doing?" she asked in a low voice.

"Trying to get the key to Nestore's cell," I said with a shrug. I had waited far too long, had been too scared.

She shook her head slowly, worry clouding her expression. "These men are monsters. I won't let you walk around them like this."

"They won't hurt me. They're too scared of my father."

"Your father will punish *you* if they touch you. Maybe he'll punish them too, but you will get the brunt of it."

"I must save him, Flavia. It's all I can think about. I *must do it before it is too late*."

“I will get the key for you. Promise me you won’t go near the guards like this. Stay away from them.”

“I don’t want you to risk the baby’s or your life for me.”

“Your father won’t kill me until his son is born. He needs an heir to appear stronger. I always knew my death was a likely result of this marriage.”

“Flavia—”

“You took care of me when your father tried to beat me into submission at the beginning of our marriage. You were a child, but you risked everything. It’s my turn to give back. This is my choice.”

I gave a small nod, even if I still worried about the consequences. I didn’t want her or the baby to get hurt. “Promise me you’ll come with us. Promise me you’ll run away.”

She sighed. “I’m in no state to run. I…” She gave me a resigned smile. “Don’t worry about me, okay?”

I didn’t agree, but I decided not to argue with her for now.

I returned to my room and changed into my usual clothes. That night, Flavia came over to my room and handed me a bundle with keys. There were the keys to Nestore’s cell, the front gates, and almost every door in the house on it. The front door and gates also operated with fingerprints, but the system broke down on occasion, so Father and the guards always had physical keys on hand just in case. I gave her a wide-eyed look as she hovered in front of me in a skimpy nightgown. “Your father fell asleep afterward. Hurry. Now’s your best bet to make it out of here.”

I slipped out of bed and put on sneakers and a cardigan. I didn’t want to waste time getting dressed. I only owned dresses, so there was nothing good for an escape.

“You should hurry. Take a car. But the keys to them are in the guard rooms.”

Father never drove a car himself after he became Underboss.

“Maybe we’ll escape on foot and then try to hitchhike.”

Flavia nodded, but her eyes reflected sorrow and fear.

I touched her belly. “Be safe, you two, okay?”

“As safe as we can be. Find happiness.”

Happiness… what a wonderful concept. I stuffed some money and the keys into a bag and hurried away, not looking back at Flavia.

My pulse pounded in my ears as I rushed down the stairs to the basement. When Nestore spotted me, he pushed to his feet. He had the slightest limp from his last beating, and my heart sank, worrying about how we'd get out of here if he couldn't run.

"Amelia, what—"

I pulled out the keys and picked the one for the lock in front of me, then opened Nestore's cell. For a moment, trepidation flashed across his face. The sound of the lock being turned usually meant pain, so his reaction made sense and filled me with a new resolve. We needed to get out of here before my father killed Nestore.

"We're running away," I whispered as I swung open the door. For the first time in two years, no bars were between us. Nestore stepped closer, then over the threshold into the corridor. He let out a deep breath as he peered down at me. I had forgotten how tall Nestore was. Standing in front of me, he towered over me.

His entire face morphed into wonder as he looked left, then right in the corridor.

"You risk too much for me," he said eventually.

"Not just for you. I'm doing this for me."

The truth of the matter was that I would have never run away if it weren't for Nestore. I wouldn't have been brave enough for myself.

Nestore held out his hand. "Come on. I know this place by heart." I put my hand in his, and he closed his fingers around mine. We had this one chance to make it out of here alive, and we had to take it.

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CHAPTER FIVE

My heart picked up at the feel of Nestore's scarred palm in mine. We had held hands before, but this felt different.

He tugged me toward the emergency exit. Despite his limp, he was fast. His body was battered, but the strength he harbored carried him up the stairs with surprising speed. I had trouble keeping up with his long strides, but pushed myself as hard as I could. Hope seemed to carry me when my legs couldn't.

Nestore led us to a back door near the kitchens that I had never seen. He immediately recognized the correct keys from the bundle and unlocked the door, then tugged me outside. For a moment, he froze and sucked in a deep breath. His eyes lit up in wonder as he gazed up at the sky. He hadn't seen the sky in two years, hadn't felt a breeze on his skin. Tears stung in my eyes. I should have risked this far sooner.

He peered down at me and shook his head. "No regrets, Amelia. I never wanted you to risk anything for me. You already put your life on the line by feeding me and giving me medicine."

He scanned our surroundings. "Who are the guards?"

I tried to remember whose shift it was, then named the four guards who would walk the perimeter today.

Nestore's jaw tightened. Three of the men used to be his father's. "If they kept the same routine, I know where to slip out."

"What about the dogs?"

"They know me. We have to hope that's enough."

Nestore's hand around mine tightened as he pulled me along the house wall, then toward the pool pavilion before we hurried over a long stretch of lawn that lay in the dark.

Barks sounded, followed by shouts and the beams of flashlights cutting through the dark.

"No," I gasped out.

The snarls and barks came closer. Nestore dragged me into the maze. I had never set foot inside it, always remembering the story of his mother. Nestore's hand squeezed mine as he tugged me along, turning one corner after the other. It was near black within the maze. The high wall of roses didn't allow much light to penetrate the aisles, and even the moonlight got stuck at the edges. The thorns snatched at my nightgown and hair as we brushed past the rose bushes. My breath came in short, pained gasps, my sides screaming with pain. I wondered how Nestore could run like this after years in the cage, but his workouts must have preserved some of his former strength.

The maze distorted the barks and voices that chased us. How close were our hunters?

How could we escape from this?

"I know how to get out on the other side. We just need to outrun the dogs."

I would have laughed if I had enough breath left for it.

Another bark sounded. Too close. Nestore threw a glance over his shoulder, then pivoted, so I was behind him, shielded by his body as a big beast of a dog chased down the aisle toward us. A scream lodged in my throat. Everything happened too fast after that. The dog lunged at Nestore and took him down. I slung my purse over my head, bringing it down on the dog's back, hoping to get him off Nestore. Nestore had the beast by the collar, trying to stop it from ripping into his face. With a battle cry, Nestore managed to shove the dog off him, so it landed on its side. That didn't stop

it for long. It lunged again, but this time, Nestore brandished one of the keys like a knife and rammed it into the dog's belly with enough force to pierce the skin. The dog yowled and jerked away, limping off, then dropped to the ground at the corner. Before either Nestore or I could get our bearings, four guards rounded the corner and pointed their weapons at us.

"No," I whispered, terror filling me up. Nestore gave me a sad smile. One of the men stepped forward. He held a stun gun. The prongs shot out and hit Nestore. Gasping, he sank to the ground and began to spasm.

"Stop it!" I begged, but they didn't stop until Nestore lost consciousness. My father appeared behind the guards. Even in the dark, I could make out the utter rage on his face.

Fear overcame me. For Nestore. For myself. For Flavia and the baby. What would happen to us now?

Father stalked toward Nestore and began to kick him hard in the side and the stomach.

"Stop it!" I screamed, taking a step forward to intervene. Father's hateful gaze hit me as he let up from Nestore and advanced on me. I backed away until the thorns pierced my back.

Father raised his arm and backhanded me across the face. My lip burned fiercely, and the taste of copper coated my tongue. "You traitorous bitch."

Another slap, even harder, hit my cheek and mouth. My head rang as I went down to my knees, my cheek stinging fiercely. I swallowed spit and blood, trying to keep the nausea at bay. Cruel hands gripped my hair. I clasped his wrists to keep some weight off my scalp, but it still hurt. He dragged me after him, and I had no chance to get on my feet. I was crying from pain and terror by the time we reached the basement.

Two guards tossed an unconscious Nestore into his cell before they locked it. Father held me upright by my hair, his expression brimming with fury and disgust as he peered down at me.

With a snarl, he shoved me toward another cell. I stumbled inside and dropped to my knees. Not wanting to kneel in front of my father, I shoved to my feet and clutched the bars to steady myself and get my bearings. Father locked the door and tossed the keys to the lanky guy by his side with an evil gleam in his eyes. "Bury them in the garden. I won't need them again." His cruel gaze hit me. "This will be your tomb, whore. No daughter of mine betrays her own blood to help a gutter rat."

“Leave her alone,” Nestore growled in a raw voice as he dragged himself to his legs. His body was too weak and battered for this. Fear for him burned through me.

Father’s answering grin turned my blood to ice.

“Unlock the door,” he ordered the older, heavyset man, who didn’t hesitate to open Nestore’s cell.

No. No. No. Nestore had barely survived the last torture session three days ago, and my father looked like he would do worse today.

“Don’t hurt him. You’ll kill him!” I whispered.

Nestore gave me a pained look as if he wanted me to be quiet. Father looked between him and me, and a sadistic gleam filled his eyes. He began to beat Nestore with his fists, then, when Nestore collapsed, he kicked him. It was nothing compared to last time yet—no lighter, no knife, no electroshocks—but my heart couldn’t take it. I cried silently. Nestore was still on the ground, panting, blood trickling out of his mouth as he met my gaze. “It’s okay,” he mouthed.

Father stepped back, his eyes narrowing on me, then he smiled. He walked out and took the water hose that the guards used to clean the cells and the prisoners. “He’s become too adept at bearing pain. Let’s see how good he is at handling yours.”

Before I could react, cold water smashed into me with a force that had me stumbling backward against the wall. I gasped from the freezing cold that bit into my skin like icy fingers. Water filled my mouth and flooded my airways, making me sputter and then gasp. I tried to breathe, but the water jet assaulted my face, cutting off the air. My skin burned from the force of the water. I fell to my knees, choking, my eyes squeezed shut. Pain filled my face. Would any skin be left? It felt as if I was being skinned alive by the water.

My vision swam as I gulped down more water in my desperation to breathe.

Nestore’s terrified roars mixed with the whooshing of the water.

I tumbled to my side, shaking violently in pain and lack of air. Soon, blissful oblivion would grab me. I wanted it. How could Nestore have survived years of torture? I wanted to give up. I wanted to die to end this.

You promised to stay. I fought against unconsciousness, but it snagged at my mind.

The water flow stopped. I sucked in a deep breath but remained curled up on the stone floor. Tremors wracked my bruised body. Who knew water could be this cruel? My face burned with pain, and my body felt battered as if hundreds of fists had rained down on it.

“I see her pain is yours. What a beautiful thing,” Father drawled.

I kept my eyes closed. Now he had another way to torture Nestore, but maybe it was better this way. If I took the torture, Nestore’s body could heal.

“I’ll be back later. She’s too weak.” Steps crunched, and the heavy door fell shut.

“Amelia.”

Nestore’s voice beckoned me to leave the dark, but I felt too fragile to move.

“Dove, please.”

I forced my eyes open even though my lids ached from the movement. My vision was blurry as I sought a cowering form in the neighboring cell. I forced a smile that felt as if my skin splintered. “Why dove?”

Nestore crouched at the bars, watching me with utter heartache and self-hatred. “Because you call to a peaceful place deep inside me.”

I smiled, then winced at the ache in my skin. Everything felt sore.

Nestore got up, walked over to his bed, and picked up the copy of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. He sat against the bars separating us and began to read in his deep, soothing voice. I closed my eyes and allowed the familiar words to drag me into a fantasy world far from this.

When Nestore stopped, I opened my eyes with a grateful smile.

Nestore put down the book and gave me a sad look.

“He’ll hurt you now.”

“I know. But I’ll gladly bear the pain if it means you won’t have to.”

Nestore’s face twisted with despair. “Bearing witness to your pain causes me tenfold the anguish than being tortured. You must be safe.”

I swallowed. I considered sitting up, but my body shook too much. The water had been icy, and the cold seeped into every layer of my body. I lifted trembling fingers to my face, needing to feel the skin. It felt a little rough but not flayed as I’d expected. No blood either, except from the cut in my lip. “It felt as if my skin was scraped off.”

“It’s just a little red. There won’t be scars.”

Yet. Who knew what else my father had planned for me, for us?

Nestore kept his eyes on me as if his gaze alone was enough to give me strength, and in a way, it did. Eventually, I crawled over to the bars and linked hands with Nestore. He brushed his fingertips across my cheeks, like a whisper, and I leaned into his touch. I wanted nothing more than to curl up against Nestore, to feel his heartbeat against my chest, to feel his comforting warmth. I wanted to believe that one day we would get the chance.

But deep down, I knew the chances of us getting out of here alive were close to nonexistent.

"You need to take off your wet clothes. If you get pneumonia…" His voice choked up with fear.

I let out a shuddering breath. The idea of getting up and out of my clothes seemed too monumental, but Nestore's worried expression spurred me on, and so I dragged myself up by the bars. I glanced over at the bed. A rough gray blanket lay folded at the foot of it.

I forced one foot in front of the other until I reached it. Then I began to peel off my nightgown. I kept my panties on and slung the blanket around my body. The coarse material rubbed over my sore skin painfully, making me wince, but it was warm, and that was all that mattered. I draped my nightgown over the sink, then slunk back to where Nestore waited, his back turned to me.

"I'm decent. You can turn around." Tears filled my eyes at Nestore's consideration. He was so sweet to me. I wished I could have saved him today.

"Don't cry," Nestore said roughly.

"I'm surprised I still have tears left."

"It's a good sign. It means he didn't break you yet."

I swallowed hard. "He'll try now that I'm in here."

Nestore's face flashed with despair. "I want to protect you, but I don't know how."

"At least, we're always together now."

Nestore pressed his forehead against the bars separating us. "You don't belong in here."

"Neither do you."

"Sometimes I forget who I was before this."

“I’m here to remind you.”

Time became meaningless down here. Several weeks passed. How many? It was hard to tell. Nobody ever came down here to talk to either of us. Father had stationed guards at every door, so even if Flavia had tried to visit, she wouldn’t have succeeded. The only one who came for me was my father. Like he had this morning. Or afternoon? What time was it? What day?

My eyes moved when my body could no longer do so, until I found Nestore. He too lay on his side, with his eyes on me, as broken, as desperate as I was. Like always, he had suffered worse. Father tortured him worse, but he could take it better. I wasn’t sure I could survive for much longer.

I lay there battered and broken, watching him as he watched me. In the beginning, I’d cried every time I had to use the toilet because he could hear it. Now I didn’t even ask him to turn around anymore, though he always looked away.

Our breathing was heavy in the basement’s silence. It rattled in our chests, a desperate echo in the darkness.

Nestore stretched out his hand, slowly, his chest heaving from the effort and agony, until his fingertips passed the bars between our cells.

I looked at them for a few heartbeats, at the blood sticking to them, before I inched my fingers toward his. A small sigh passed Nestore’s lips when our fingers touched.

This slight touch symbolized the fragility of my will to live. I wasn’t sure how Nestore had survived for so long without any hope for escape or a better future.

“Stay,” he croaked.

I blinked. *I will*. I wasn’t sure if I’d said the word or only thought it, but Nestore understood me without many words.

I didn’t want to die, but I knew I couldn’t live in this eternal darkness forever. We both needed a miracle. I wished I believed in them.

Amelia lay curled up on the pallet, covered in the blanket. Her nightgown wouldn’t dry down here. It was too dank.

Her red hair tumbled down the edge of the bed. She didn’t belong in here. I wished I could save her. I spent almost every waking moment I was alone fantasizing about how I’d torture and kill her father, but sometimes, very rarely, my dreams were filled with images of a future with Amelia. The darkness inside my chest was almost crushing, and I had no way to unleash it. I wondered when it would simply burst out of me.

The door creaked open, and my body filled with adrenaline as my flight instinct kicked in. I had learned to hide my terror, but it still filled me every time the door opened. It rarely meant anything good.

I was surprised to see Flavia Lamorgese enter the cell. I hadn’t seen her since my birthday party. She was heavily pregnant. Bruises bloomed on her face and covered her arms. Her gaze passed me by and latched onto Amelia. Worry and fear clouded her expression. “Is she…?”

“Asleep,” I rasped.

Her eyes met mine, and she sighed. “I warned her to stop visiting you, but she wouldn’t listen. And for what?”

I held her gaze. “I’d put my life down for her.”

She scowled. “You’ll both die down here!” She choked up and swallowed hard, then her face became hard. “I have clothes and food for her.”

“Considering the state of your face, I’d recommend you don’t sneak down here either.” I didn’t really care for her fate, but Amelia often talked kindly about her and obviously cared about her stepmother, so I felt compelled to warn her.

“He knows. He wants her well enough so he can torture you both.” Her voice broke, and her shoulders slumped. “She shouldn’t have risked it for you.”

“I know,” I said.

She regarded me as if to gauge my sincerity, then quickly looked away. I wondered what she saw in my face that scared her so much. She slid a heap of clothes and a plastic plate with sandwiches into Amelia’s cell. After a moment of hesitation, she took one of the sandwiches.

“Don’t,” I said.

“She’ll share her food with you anyway.”

“She will, but she won’t believe you gave it to me and will insist on sharing more of her food with me.”

She put the food back down and rose to her feet. Her eyes lingered on Amelia. “I’ll try to talk him into letting her go. She still has worth for him if he marries her off. It’s better than dying down here.”

Jealousy reared its head. The idea that Amelia would marry someone else felt like a dagger in my chest, but Flavia was right. If that meant Amelia would get out of here alive, then I’d choose that option.

“Why did he send you down here?” I asked.

“To punish me for helping you.”

“Looks like he punished you already.” I motioned to her many bruises.

She shuddered. “You know very well that’s nothing.”

I did. She left without another word, and I sank on my bed to keep an eye on Amelia, even if there was nothing I could do. Soon, her body shook with nightmares. I got up, ignoring the pain in my side, and walked over to the bars. “Amelia, wake up.” She didn’t wake.

“Wake up!”

She jerked up with wide eyes. The terror in them reminded me of the beginning of my captivity. How often had I woken with my pulse pounding in my ears and my heart threatening to burst out of my rib cage? This primal fear had become a part of me, and in some ways, it had lost its

threat. Pain and torture were part of my reality. I didn't know how I'd ever existed without them.

I wanted to say "You're safe," but she wasn't, and I didn't want to lie to her. Her blue eyes settled on me, and she smiled. Smiled as if we both weren't doomed to rot in this dank basement, as if pain and misery wouldn't be part of the rest of our lives.

I wasn't sure how, but I wanted to save her. I didn't care if I died doing it. Amelia wouldn't survive years in this cell, and I wouldn't survive without Amelia.

She had become my reason for existing.

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CHAPTER SIX

15 years old
Eight months later

I tried to figure out what day it was by the markings on the wall. I hadn't begun counting the days at the beginning of my captivity, stupid enough to believe it would be temporary. Sometimes when I'd felt too weak, I hadn't counted either, but I estimated it had to be Christmas soon, which also meant that Nestore's eighteenth birthday probably wasn't that far away.

The creak of the door to the cellblock opening tightened my belly until it felt like solid rock. My pulse began racing as I wondered what was in store for us today. The air suddenly felt too thick to breathe. I struggled with every intake of air. The beatings had become less frequent in the past two to three months. Maybe once a week, Father still came down here to whip me with his belt or pummel me with the unrelenting water from the hose. I wasn't sure what was going on, but he looked as if he were the one being hunted. He had been Capo for only three months, but since taking over from the previous person, he had lost weight.

It made me gleeful to know things were tough for him. I didn't remember if I'd ever loved my father. Maybe as a little girl, before he'd killed my mother and later his second wife, but the memories of those warmer emotions were distant and almost unimaginable. Maybe they had never existed in the first place, and I only wished they had.

Nestore did sit-ups in his cell. He worked out every day, using his own body weight, but a lack of food slowed his progress. He was only muscles, sinew, and bone, and always on the verge of passing out. I spent hours watching him. Nothing filled me with more warmth than the sight of him.

One of the younger guards, a bulky man with a bald patch he tried to cover with the longer hair from the side of his head, entered the cellblock. The little hairs at the nape of my neck rose when his brown eyes settled on me. Something in them was greedy and hungry.

He sauntered over to my cell, twirling the key chain around his index finger as he leered at me. "My, my, Amelia Lamorgese. You used to be untouchable. Look at you now."

I ignored him and looked back down at my notebook, where I wrote down dreams and hopes and memories from long ago, everything that kept me busy and reminded me I was still human.

"Ignoring me?" The sound of the key jarring in the lock made me tremble. My instincts screamed at me to run and hide, but I was trapped.

My throat closed up.

I caught Nestore's eyes. He sat up, his eyes reflecting concern. No, *fear.*

I swallowed hard. The guard opened my cell door with a jarring creak and stepped in. The way he scanned me from head to toe made me want to creep under the cot like a small child, as if that would protect me. It hadn't in the past when Father had come to my room to punish me, and it wouldn't now.

"Where's my father?" I inquired, trying to sound confident. He smirked as he locked himself inside the cell.

My heart seemed to burst out of my chest as my eyes scanned my surroundings for a weapon I could use, even if I'd never done it before.

"Leave her alone," Nestore snarled.

The guard laughed, a dirty sound from deep in his belly. "Watch and learn, boy. Not that you'll ever get the chance to fuck a woman. You'll die a

virgin down here. If you're lucky, one of the guards will at least fuck your ass one day."

I shuddered, fear making my pulse rush in my veins. His shadow fell over me. My hand shook too much to keep writing, so I lifted the pen off the paper and peered up.

"What do you want?"

He cackled. "I think you know what I want."

He gripped my arms and jerked me to my feet. I screamed, overcome with terror. Without thinking, I rammed the pen into his upper arm. He roared and ripped it out, then tossed it away.

He slapped me so hard I fell to the floor, my head ringing from the impact.

"Leave her alone! You're a dead man!" Nestore roared, but the guard only sneered as he staggered toward me.

"I'll rip your dirty cunt apart, you bitch."

I scrambled backward, toward Nestore's cell. The guard followed and bent over me, gripping my hair.

My scalp seemed to split open. The pain blinded me briefly, and I screamed.

A martial scream sounded. Not mine.

Nestore gripped the guard's shirt and jerked him toward the bars. His face slammed against them, so he released my hair, and Nestore wrapped his arm around the man's throat from behind, holding on to the bars for leverage.

The man's eyes bulged as he struggled against Nestore's hold, his arms flailing almost comically. I scrambled away, my heart slamming into my rib cage as I watched. Nestore pulled my pen from his trousers and rammed the tip into the guard's eye over and over again. The man's flailing increased, and the key chain flew out of his hand and past the bars into the aisle. Nestore released the guard when he hung limply in his grip, and he tumbled to the ground, gurgling as blood spurted out of his eyes. Nestore breathed harshly as the guard jerked, then stilled.

I was frozen in shock. Blood spread out around the head, and the stench of feces flooded my nose.

Nestore had killed this man in a horrid fashion. I wasn't even sure why I was so shocked.

“The keys,” Nestore rasped, looking exhausted. I stumbled toward the bars and knelt, then squeezed my arm through the gap between the bars, trying to reach the dropped keys, but they were still more than an arm’s length away.

“I can’t reach them,” I whispered.

Nestore sank to the floor with his back against the bars, his chest heaving. I crawled over to him and touched his shoulder. “Thank you for saving me.”

“I’ll always save you,” he said fiercely.

I sat against the bars, so our backs were touching, and regarded the corpse with trepidation. “I hope they’ll bring us food tonight, so someone takes away the body.”

“He’s dead. You don’t have to fear the dead. Fear the living,” Nestore murmured. He was right, but the idea of spending the night with the dead body terrified me. His face was disfigured from the pen and would definitely feature in my nightmares.

“I’m worried they’ll punish you if they find out you killed him,” I whispered. “I’ll tell them I did it in self-defense.”

“They won’t care if it was self-defense, Amelia. Let me take responsibility. I didn’t save you so you’d get punished for something else. You won’t take the fall. They can’t do anything to me that they haven’t already done.”

Despite his words, I could detect a note of fear in Nestore’s voice. I wished I could protect him as he protected me. I wished we could find a way out of this.

I washed myself with the small cloth Flavia had given me for that purpose. It was rough and smelled musty by now. The cool water on my skin felt good, even as the cotton skimmed bruises and cuts. I imagined I still didn’t smell particularly good. I didn’t have any soap, so blood and sweat seemed

to have ingrained themselves in my skin, but my nose was immune to it by now.

Nestore did push-ups in the cell beside mine. Nobody had come to torture either of us in ten days.

Nobody had visited us at all in more than twenty-four hours, which meant no food, and the dead body had been in a cell with me since yesterday. As he began to decay, it became increasingly difficult to ignore his presence. Nestore was pushing his body more because of these new developments.

“What do you think is going on?” I asked. Flavia hadn’t been allowed to come down here in many weeks, so I didn’t get any updates, and even before that, her visits had been rare since she’d given birth to Luciano four months ago. I hadn’t seen him yet. She didn’t want to bring him down into the basement, a decision I wholeheartedly agreed with. This wasn’t a place for a child.

Nestore paused mid push-up and looked at me before he resumed his workout, panting, “Something is in the air. I can sense it. Your father exuded animal fear the last time he came for me. Someone’s after him.”

I bit my lip. “That’s good, right?”

Nestore got on his knees, sweat trickling down his chest. The bruises and cuts had partly healed after so many days without torture, but the many scars spoke of the pain he’d endured. Seeing his missing left nipple always made my belly tighten.

Still, for the first time since Nestore had been thrown into this cell, fresh injuries didn’t slow him down. His motions were more fluid, and I caught a glimmer of anticipation in his eyes.

“The question is if the one who’s after him will be after us.”

“It can hardly get worse for you.”

“Whoever comes next might torture you in ways your father hasn’t done for various reasons. So it can get indefinitely worse for us.” His eyes moved to the man he’d killed. “Though if your father lost control over his men, your situation could already be perilous, dove.”

I swallowed hard. I hadn’t considered it from that angle yet. In all the time I had been down here, nobody had dared to touch me inappropriately, so maybe my father still wanted to marry me off.

Nestore got up and walked over to the bars separating us. He gripped them and looked at me with fierce determination. “I’ll protect you, Amelia. Somehow, someway. When someone comes in, you get as close to my cell as possible so I can reach through the bars and attack them.” He pulled the bloody pen from his pocket as if to remind me what he could do, when I hadn’t stopped thinking about it.

I got up from the bed and moved toward him, smiling slightly. I grabbed the bars below his hands. He leaned his head against the bars, and I brought my face up so our foreheads touched. The small touch sent a wave of warmth into my belly.

Eventually, Nestore and I returned to our respective spots, me reading the same book for the hundredth time and Nestore doing crunches. I admired his discipline. Some days, I barely had the energy to go to the toilet.

An explosion above shook the bars, followed by more bangs, screams, and shots.

I froze, unsure what to do. Nestore’s alert gaze flitted from me to the ceiling.

The door to the basement banged open, and one of the guards rushed in. He moved toward Nestore’s cell and fumbled with the keys because his hands shook so much. What was going on?

I got up from my bed, anxiety filling my body. “Where are you taking him?”

The man ignored me and finally found the correct key to unlock Nestore’s cell.

Nestore remained on the floor, but something in his eyes reminded me of a tiger on the verge of leaping. He didn’t look worried. He looked determined.

The guard ripped open the door and stepped in. “Get up!” he ordered as he stalked toward Nestore, who remained on the ground. But I noticed the tightening of his muscles, the preparation for something as the guard towered above him.

The split second before Nestore shoved to his feet and lunged at our guard, his face turned into something alien, something so consumed by violence that for the first time in my life I felt a flicker of fear toward the

boy I loved with all my heart. I rushed forward, pressing against the bars, fear clogging my throat.

Nestore collided with the guard and clawed at his eyes. Then, with a warlike scream that pierced my soul and heart, he sank his teeth into the man's throat. Blood spurted everywhere when he jerked his head back with a chunk of flesh between his white teeth.

I sank to my knees, clutching at the bars as I watched Nestore become a vicious beast. The man's pained screech died in a gurgle. Upstairs, more gunshots rang out, followed by shouts and screams. When the guard stopped struggling, Nestore lifted his head, the muscles in his back flexing with every pant.

Nestore turned to me, baring his teeth in a terrifying smile. Madness shone in his eyes. Now that he'd tasted the addicting tang of violence, he'd want more. I could see it in every beautiful line of his face.

I shuddered. Nestore pushed to his feet, grabbed the keys from the floor and a knife from a holster at the dead man's waist, then walked up to the door to my cell. The sound of the lock turning made me shiver. I still knelt on the floor, staring at the pool of blood slowly extending toward me. Nestore took me by the arms and pulled me to my feet. I blinked up at his tall form, trying not to linger on the blood on his chin and chest.

"We need to leave," I whispered. "This isn't our fight."

Nestore's gaze moved to the ceiling, his eyes becoming distant as he listened to the sounds of fighting—shots, heavy thuds like bodies hitting the floor, and agonized screams.

I took his free hand, the one that wasn't clutching a knife. "Nestore. We must leave."

The moment he looked back down at me, I knew he couldn't leave. An apologetic gleam filled his eyes.

"This is my fight, dove. It's always been. I can't leave."

After everything he had to endure, why couldn't he seek safety? Why did he want to risk everything again? And for what? "Why? Is this about power?"

"Yes," he said, his eyes lighting up with resolve. "Power means I'll be able to protect you."

"We could go somewhere safe, somewhere you wouldn't have to protect me. Somewhere we can both find peace and live a normal life."

He gave me a bitter smile. “Peace.” He tested the word as if it were unfamiliar, and maybe it was.

Another bang sounded, much closer this time. Nestore’s grip on me tightened, and he tugged me toward the emergency exit, then up the first flight of stairs before we burst into the corridor in front of the kitchen. A body lay motionless in the doorway in an ocean of its own blood. The man’s throat had been cut. I swallowed hard, my belly turning. In the past, the sight would have made me throw up, but I had seen too much. Nestore’s grip on my hand tightened as he tugged me past the corpse without an outward reaction. The shots and explosions and screams had stopped, but the low murmur of voices told me we weren’t alone. Where was Father?

Had he been in the house during the attack? Was he dead?

The thought filled me with relief.

Nestore stopped abruptly, and I bumped into him. He put his index finger against his lips, a warning in his eyes. I gave a jerky nod as I followed him farther down the long corridor toward the foyer. Nestore squinted as the light from the chandelier and crystal lamps hit us. We’d lived in the half dark for a while, and he hadn’t seen daylight in far longer.

My heart throbbed fiercely when Nestore led us toward the ballroom, the knife brandished in front of him. How was a knife supposed to protect us from a large number of attackers? An image of Nestore killing the guard with his bare teeth flitted through my mind and made me shudder. Maybe Nestore’s fury would be the weapon.

“Nestore?” a careful male voice asked.

Nestore’s entire body became taut as a bowstring, a look of shock passing his face before suspicion and wariness took their place. I glanced past him at a tall guy with chestnut-brown hair who had a gun in his hand and blood splatters all over his gray combat pants and T-shirt. An angry red scar ran across his left cheek. Who was he?

Behind him, two even taller guys with black hair appeared, maybe in their late teens or early twenties, but with a gleam in their eyes that revealed they’d been through a lot. Both were covered in blood and carried guns.

Nestore’s expression became feral, his eyes narrowing. “Falcone,” he spat like it was a curse.

I flinched at the viciousness in his voice, my eyes darting to the black-haired guys, and it finally clicked as I looked at the one without any visible

tattoos.

This was Benedetto’s oldest son, Remo Falcone.

My cousin Niccolo was alive. He was here. He was here with the Falcones.

Anger and a renewed sense of betrayal overcame me. Benedetto Falcone had been behind the killing of my father. He had approved of my torture and captivity. The Falcones were my enemies.

“Come with us into the ballroom. Let’s not discuss what needs to be spoken about in a hallway,” Niccolo said, putting his gun back into the holster at his back. The Falcones didn’t lower their guns. Their eyes were alert. They considered me a threat, as they should. Amelia trembled against my back. She was scared and for good reason.

I immediately recognized Remo Falcone. He bore a disturbing resemblance to Benedetto, with his dark eyes and black hair, and his face reflected the utter madness he was famous for. His brother, beside him, carried an air of calm I couldn’t fathom. It was mirrored in his cold gray eyes. I had to look away.

My cousin watched me with a pleading expression. What was he expecting from me? A warm greeting?

I wanted to believe that Niccolo wasn’t my enemy, our enemy, but the past had taught me not to trust anyone—except for Amelia.

“I thought you were dead,” I said to Niccolo in accusation.

“I thought the same about you. I searched for you when things escalated at your party, but when I didn’t find you and saw all the dead bodies, I ran. I didn’t find out you were alive until recently, when I joined Remo on his quest. I immediately wanted to save you, cousin. We spent the last year winning back California to get the chance to attack this mansion.”

He sounded sincere, but distrust was ingrained in every fiber of my being.

“Join us in the ballroom.” Remo Falcone motioned toward the double doors.

“Behind these doors, your father betrayed my family and slaughtered them like pigs.”

He looked at me in a way that felt too familiar, as if I reminded him of someone he knew. “We have no intention to hurt you or that girl cowering behind your back. We came to free you. We are here to give you what you deserve and desire.”

“You know nothing about me,” I rasped. Achille had told me he’d offer Amelia to Remo if the chance ever arose. What if the oldest Falcone wanted my dove? Could I kill him and the men who obeyed him?

His face broke into a smirk. “Oh, but I do. I know the look in your eyes, and I know exactly what you crave with every broken part of your damned soul.”

I shuddered because his words did something to me. They answered a call I couldn’t answer in years.

Remo and the other man turned and moved through the doors into the ballroom. Niccolo remained in the hallway with us. “You can trust me. You can trust them. Remo is a good Capo.”

“Is he Capo?” I asked.

“To everyone who matters, yes. The traitors who remain in his territory will eventually be dead. Lamorgese called himself Capo until today.”

“Where is he?” I asked with a tremor in my voice. Fear and rage battled a bloody war in my body. I wanted to feed the latter and starve the former. I was stronger than my fear.

“He got captured.”

“Is he alive?”

Niccolo motioned toward the ballroom. “You should talk to Remo. It’s not my place to tell you everything.”

My lips curled. “Where do your loyalties lie?”

“With Remo and you. Come, Nestore. Let the past rest and become part of the new Camorra.”

“Let the past rest?” I snarled. Amelia flinched against me. I had to swallow my rage and need for blood in the basement, but she would soon get used to this side of me. “Do you have the slightest idea what I have endured these…” I hesitated. I wasn’t even sure how long I had been down in the basement.

“Almost three years. Next month, you’ll turn eighteen.”

“Three years,” I echoed, my throat tight with useless emotions. Amelia pressed her small palms against my bare back in silent reassurance, and I relaxed slightly. I swallowed down the pain and sorrow to glare at my cousin. “Do you know what I went through these last three years while you were free to join a revolution?”

Niccolo’s eyes scanned my naked torso. “I can guess.”

I shook my head. These scars didn’t even tell half the story. They didn’t show the many ways in which Lamorgese and his men had humiliated me and made me feel less than human. Sometimes I still tasted the vileness of everything they forced me to eat in my mouth.

“Come, Nestore. Remo will give you a great future.”

Niccolo moved backward but kept his eyes on me. Maybe he realized the danger he was in. I glanced back at Amelia, who watched me with huge, anxious eyes. I wanted her to be safe, but for that to happen, I had to become powerful, more powerful than Lamorgese, more powerful than my father even. I couldn’t do this alone.

I squeezed her hand and tugged her along as I followed Niccolo into the ballroom.

It was littered with dead guards, but several of them were alive and kneeling on the floor with guns pointed at them by Remo’s men. Their eyes flitted to me, shock and revulsion twisting their faces, before they looked away.

Remo and the other Falcone brother waited in the middle of the vast room. I wondered where his two youngest brothers were. If he were anything like Benedetto, he’d probably have killed them.

Remo looked like he considered himself the king of this place. As Capo, he technically was, but I wanted to become the master of these walls again.

“You decided to join us,” Remo said with a twisted smile.

I didn’t return the smile. I allowed my eyes to take in the splendor of the ballroom. This room used to be filled with good memories for me, but now all I could think of as I scanned the hardwood floor was how father’s blood and bowels had spilled on it.

“You are both injured,” Remo’s brother said.

Amelia’s wrist was swollen. Nobody had treated it. I worried it had been broken two weeks ago.

Remo’s brother stalked toward us and reached for Amelia, so I lunged. He blocked my weakened body and stepped back, palms raised in a way that erased most of my rage. “Nobody touches her,” I growled. Amelia cast a terrified look up at my face. She didn’t have to be afraid. I wouldn’t let anyone hurt her ever again. I had failed her for too long.

His cool gray eyes took me in with a calm I couldn’t fathom. “She’s yours.”

“Mine,” I exhaled. *Mine*. Nobody would ever hurt Amelia again. I had been powerless for too long, unable to help my dove. Never again. I tucked Amelia closer. She was mute, shaking in my hold, her cheek pressed against my sternum. Too much had happened.

The brother exchanged a look with Remo. While they shared facial features and dark hair, the calm gray in the brother’s eyes was replaced with dark irises that reflected the same feverish rage and hunger for destruction that ravaged my broken body. The same blood, but so different.

“My brother Nino can tend to your wounds. And hers,” he said, eyes firm on mine, cautious but not hostile.

“Why are you here?” My voice lacked the gratefulness I felt for the freedom he had given me, but a savior could be a new enemy in disguise. With Amelia’s safety on the line, I couldn’t risk being trusting. Trust was a luxury I would never risk again.

“I am Remo Falcone, the man who’ll rule over the entire Camorra once all the rats are off the ship. And you, Nestore, can rule as Underboss under my rule. The Romanos were loyal.”

“Loyalty got my father killed by your father. Loyalty turned me into a prisoner of a monster.”

“You were loyal to a man who never understood what that phrase means. My father was a monster.”

“And you’re not?” I narrowed my eyes at the blood covering his clothes and skin. He carried it like a badge of honor. Blood was his friend, but it was mine too.

He laughed, a rough sound that made Amelia flinch in my hold. I tightened my arm around her, my muscles tautening. “Oh, make no mistake, I’m a monster of his making, but I’m a monster that rewards loyalty and values it over blood. What about yourself, Nestore? Do you reckon yourself not monstrous?”

I bared my teeth. “Are you worried I’m too monstrous to control?” I’d die before I’d let anyone cage me in again, but I would take as many lives with me as I could.

A hard smile twisted Remo’s mouth. “Do I look like someone who concerns himself with control? You can unleash your monster as long as you are loyal to me.”

I tilted my head. “I’m not sure I want to rule over the men who followed Lamorgese’s command. I have other plans for them.”

“It’s curious that you hold a Lamorgese in your arms when another made you suffer more than most humans can fathom.”

Amelia released a shuddery breath against my bare chest.

“She’s the reason I’m still here. She’s the air I breathe, the water I drink, the food I crave. She’s the reason for everything.”

Something wet hit my chest. I peered down at Amelia’s crown, catching a tear glittering on my scarred chest. I had seen too many of Amelia’s tears.

I could see that Remo didn’t understand what I meant. “You choose the men you rule over. What you do to the others is your decision. But make sure they aren’t the rats we want to purge from our territory. I think you have a loyal right-hand man in your cousin Niccolo.”

As a boy, I had imagined myself ruling over Los Angeles, over my city. But now? What I craved with a bone-crushing intensity was revenge. The first taste of it still lingered on my tongue.

I wiped the back of my hand across my lips. My skin came away covered in silky blood, beautifully red. It was a familiar sight, but for once, it wasn’t my own blood. Pain was the static in my bones, the familiar hum under my skin. A life without it? Unfathomable.

Remo scanned me from head to toe. “I have something for you as a present.”

He gave his brother a curt nod. Nino disappeared in long, purposeful strides. Both men were young, maybe in their early twenties, perhaps even younger. For them to rule over the Camorra, utmost brutality would be required. I needed what they had to rule over my territory. Nobody would take it from me ever again.

When Nino returned, a moment of pure animal fear took hold of me. My heart clenched in anticipation of agony. Nino dragged a struggling Achille into the room. My tormentor.

I despised my body for its initial reaction to Lamorgese. Nino dragged him closer. A bloody trail marked their passage over to us as a wound in Achille's calf dripped blood.

Amelia lifted her head a fraction, a wispy gasp leaving her lips.

Nino tossed Lamorgese to the ground in front of my feet. Part of me wanted to run, run from a terror born from years of pain and humiliation.

Remo motioned at my tormentor. "He can be yours if you want. Whenever you're ready, you can serve justice."

Lamorgese lifted his gaze and noticed me for the first time. Realization morphed into trepidation, then fear in the merciless blue eyes that had regarded me without pity for years.

"Justice?" I echoed. I looked away, unable to bear his gaze, and nodded at Remo. I didn't know what justice meant. How could I ever get justice for years lost, for all I had endured, and for the horrors Amelia had to endure and witness?

I motioned at Lamorgese without looking at him. "Why didn't you kill him yourself? It would make you look stronger to kill the man who declared himself Capo."

Remo came over, and I angled my body to shield Amelia.

"He was one of many who masqueraded as Capo since my Father's death. He's nothing to me." He gave me a knowing smile. "I would give anything to kill my father, to exact the revenge I so crave, but you, Nestore, have the power to break the man who tried to break you. You have the power to be the master over life and death, to serve him the pain he deserves. That's precious, and that's my gift to you. I want you by my side when we destroy the men who thought they could rule over my territory and the men who took yours, too. Take your power back."

I cast my eyes down to Lamorgese, who watched with huge eyes. His expression hardened when our gazes met. “You are too weak to rule. You don’t have what it takes to dish out pain.”

My lips pulled wide as I pushed Amelia behind me. Remo held out a knife, a gleaming silver blade resting on his bloody, scarred palm. “I think you know this blade. It was his.” He nodded at Lamorgese.

He didn’t need to tell me what knife it was. I recognized it the moment I saw it. It had caused me too much agony to ever forget it.

I curled my hand around the cool hilt. Revulsion filled me as I held the very weapon that had ripped agonized screams from my maltreated body.

Lamorgese let out a scoff.

Rage bubbled up in a wave that washed every other emotion away. I dropped to my knees and rammed the blade into the gap between his tibia and the fibula. A heavy sense of power overwhelmed me at the flash of pain on Lamorgese’s face. “I used to be too weak to dish out the pain you deserve, but you turned me into something capable of atrocities I was unable to imagine before your blade cut me the very first time.” I jerked the knife down, parting flesh until I hit bone. Lamorgese howled with pain, then gritted his teeth.

“This blade won’t be your tormentor beyond today.”

Relief mingled with fear in his eyes. “I don’t fear death.”

I laughed hollowly. “Death? You won’t be granted death, Achille. This blade won’t be your tormentor because I’ll carve a dagger from the very bone I’m touching now. And your own bone will be the blade that causes you agony until pain is all you know, until death is the sweet dream you don’t dare to dream. You honed me into the monster that will haunt your days and nights.” I slashed down, separating bone from flesh and sinew. Lamorgese’s screams were the most beautiful melody. His blood pooled over my fingers. Nothing else mattered. His pain was my reward. His scream, a balm to my broken soul.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

When I had imagined escaping from our prison with Nestore, it had never unfolded like this. Nestore was turning into a monster, hungry for revenge.

I whirled around, unable to bear the sight of Nestore cutting my father open. The sound of bone splintering and the cries of my father dying in a gurgle made me retch, and bile filled my mouth. I hadn't eaten in two days, or I would have thrown up too. Instead, I spit out the bile, shuddering heavily. Silence followed. I wished my father were dead. I wished it for Nestore, but remembering his words, I knew my wish wouldn't be granted. Nestore wasn't done with my father.

Heavy black boots appeared in my field of vision, and when I looked up, my gaze met merciless, almost black eyes.

Remo Falcone, son of Benedetto Falcone, the man who had commanded my father. Was his son any better? Looking into his pitiless face, I doubted it. He had freed us, true, but not out of the goodness of his pitch-black heart. He wanted power and revenge, and he knew injured animals were the most vicious. Nestore was wounded in so many ways, wounded in ways I wasn't sure could be mended after having witnessed his monstrous actions today.

Remo Falcone wanted Nestore to become his monster—an army of monsters to conquer a kingdom for another monster.

Remo dissected me with his eyes. Distrust filled his. I held his gaze even as my pulse raced from fear. I had seen too much to cower in front of another monster.

He moved closer and leaned down so his low words only reached my ears. “The path he’ll tread is one you should be certain you can follow. Are you willing to brave the dark? Or will another Lamorgese betray a Romano?”

I cringed at the implication. My father had betrayed Nestore’s father in the worst way. “I would never—”

He raised a palm, his smile hard. “You can’t even bear to witness what he’s become, and believe me, he’s still evolving.” His eyes hardened. “Or is it perhaps pity for your father that makes you close your eyes to what’s happening?”

Evolving. He made it sound as if Nestore was becoming a better version of himself, something to admire. But I wanted to keep my Nestore, the boy who listened to me reading him *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* with a wistful smile. I didn’t want him to lose himself.

I didn’t want to watch Nestore lose more of his humanity with every slice of the blade.

I was consumed by the weight of our past, by the utter darkness clawing its way out from the very depths of where I’d buried it. “I don’t pity my father.”

Remo scanned my arms and the wrist I held stiffly against my chest. “Maybe. Maybe the bruises that he left will give you the courage to become the person Nestore needs by his side.”

“You don’t know what Nestore needs.”

His smile was vicious. “But I know what he craves in the darkest corners of his broken soul.” He didn’t mean love or anything of the sort. He glanced past me at something and straightened, bringing a bit more distance between us. A warm hand on my lower back made me relax, and I sank into the touch. My Nestore.

“That look in your eyes is unnecessary and would have dire consequences under other circumstances,” Remo said, his warning gaze focused on the man behind me. “I have no interest in your girl. I have

whores to fuck and don’t need anyone for emotional bullshit. And she’s still a girl.”

“Your father enjoyed them young like that,” Nestore murmured.

I shivered.

“I’m not my father,” Remo said in a voice that sent a spike of fear through me. “I don’t betray the people loyal to me. I reward them. You can have everything you desire.”

Nestore nodded. “If I’m loyal to you.”

“If you’re loyal.”

“You saved me from my prison and gifted me him,” Nestore said, nodding toward my father. I followed his gaze with trepidation and heaved. Father lay unconscious on the floor in a pool of his own blood. Part of the bone in his lower leg was missing. Nino Falcone knelt beside him and wrapped a belt around his upper thigh to stop the blood flow. Another man attached a drip to Father’s hand.

I tore my eyes away. They were making sure he lived so he could be tortured more.

“Once we’ve gathered all the evidence, you can burn down this place if you want.”

“No,” Nestore murmured. My eyes widened. No? “This is my house. It’s where Amelia and I will live, where we’ll rule.”

Remo chuckled. “I like it. It takes a certain type of person to remain in a place like this.”

Nestore remained silent. Something in his hand caught my eye, and when I looked down, a cry lodged itself in my throat. He held a bone covered in blood and flesh in his hand. My father’s bone.

I closed my eyes, tears squeezing out.

“You and the girl should rest. The house is clear. Pick a bedroom and sleep. We can discuss the details in the morning. Nino will patch up Lamorgese so you can enjoy him for a while. And if you want, Nino will treat the girl’s and your injuries.”

“Yes,” Nestore said. I looked up at him. He looked exhausted and a little lost, as if he couldn’t believe we were finally free.

“Where are my stepmother and brother?” I asked.

“Upstairs, locked inside a bedroom,” Nino said as he straightened. My father remained motionless on the floor.

“We’ll question her later to determine her further fate,” Remo said.

“Don’t hurt her. She’s innocent.”

Remo narrowed his eyes at me, and I backed into Nestore for comfort. “I highly doubt it. She’s guilty of cowardice at the very least.”

“She endured more than you can fathom,” I whispered, rage and respect of the unhinged Capo filling me.

“Don’t assume you know anything about what my brothers and I have endured to be where we belong. Our blood and suffering will be the foundation of a new Camorra.”

“Flavia Lamorgese helped us. Without her, neither Amelia nor I would be alive. She falls under my responsibility as Underboss.”

Remo tilted his head. “Tomorrow, when you accept the tattoo of the Camorra, you’ll be Underboss, and then she’ll be yours to deal with.”

Nestore gave Remo a nod.

He took my hand again.

“Nino will take you upstairs and show you the rooms. We made sure they are all clear.”

Walking the corridors of the place that had been my home and prison for three years felt strange with Nestore by my side. This place felt haunted, as if the walls were whispering about the horrors they had seen over time. I didn’t want to stay. I hoped Nestore would eventually agree.

Nino opened the door to the primary bedroom and motioned for us to go in. Nestore waited for Nino to step back before he led me inside.

“That’s where Lamorgese slept?”

“I doubt he found much sleep here in the past few months since my brother and I began burning down everything he valued to get to him,” Nino drawled. Something about him set my teeth on edge. He appeared too emotionless, as if none of what happened today had made his pulse spike.

“Can I go to Flavia?” I asked, gathering all of my courage.

Nino looked at Nestore, then at me. “You should get cleaned up and rest. I’ll be back with a first-aid kit to treat your wounds in thirty minutes.”

He left and closed the door.

“Go ahead, take a shower. I’ll wait here and make sure you’re safe,” Nestore said. He wasn’t looking at me, though. His gaze lingered on the bone still clutched in his hand.

“Nestore—”

He shook his head. “There’s too much noise in my head right now. I need to…” He trailed off as if he wasn’t sure what he needed, what would help him.

Clinging to my father’s bone certainly wouldn’t, but I could see that he wasn’t ready for that conversation.

I touched his bicep, then turned and headed toward the bathroom. I had never been inside the primary bedroom. Father had taken it as his from the moment we moved in. The bathroom was held in black marble with gold veins. A massive round Jacuzzi bathtub was positioned in the middle. Four columns stretched from its marble edge to a vaulted ceiling with a painted night sky. The golden fittings complemented the gold accents in the black marble. A massive rain shower with a steam function took up half of one wall. The room was at least 400 square feet.

I removed my dirty shirt, sweatpants, and underwear and tossed them in the trash. They were littered with holes and blood. I was relieved to be rid of them. My skin was crusted with dirt and blood, and I didn’t even want to think about how badly I must smell. I stepped into the shower but hesitated before turning on the water. Shivers crept up and down my spine, remembering how I’d been doused with ice-cold water in the last six months. How painful it had been when the jet had hit my skin. My fingers shook as I gripped the faucet. It was just water. I had longed for a shower for months, so I wouldn’t let fear stop me. Taking a deep breath, I braced myself and turned on the water. Warm water pooled down on me, making me gasp and my body tense in expectation of pain. But the rain shower released water like a caress on my skin, and after the few moments that it took for my pulse to slow, I relaxed. I washed my hair three times before I felt as if it was clean after months of neglect, but I couldn’t untangle it with my fingers. I hoped I wouldn’t have to cut it off. After another fifteen minutes in the shower, I felt clean for the first time in a long time. I almost felt like past Amelia. I dried myself with a fluffy towel, wincing a couple of times when I touched tender spots. I wiped the steam off the mirror to regard my reflection. My ribs protruded, and my always only moderate curves were almost nonexistent. I was too thin, too weak, too bruised. I trailed my fingers over the bruises on my arms, wincing at the sharp twinge in my wrist. With the towel wrapped around my body, I tiptoed toward the door. I didn’t have any clothes.

I opened the door a crack and peered out to find Nestore still where I'd left him. His tall body looked frozen. In the light of the setting sun streaming in through the floor-to-ceiling windows, Nestore looked like he had fallen from the sky. The golden lights caught on his many scars, burn marks, and bruises. His head was tilted forward, and at first, I feared he was still staring at the bone in his hand, but his eyes were closed.

I padded toward him. He briefly tensed, then relaxed, but didn't open his eyes. When I reached him, I put a hand on his bare shoulder blade. "It's over. You survived. We survived. We're free."

His eyelids peeled open. "Free?"

I swallowed hard. "You can break through the shackles of the past."

A sad smile tugged at his lips. "Not yet." He raised a bloody hand but stopped with his fingertips an inch from my cheek. "It's not over, Amelia. This is only the beginning of my long path to revenge. It'll be cruel and merciless."

A knock stopped me from telling him that revenge would only drag him further down into darkness. Nestore stepped in front of me, barring me from view as he opened the door to Nino, who carried a first-aid kit and a heap of clothes.

Nino scanned Nestore, who still looked like he'd risen from the depths of hell. Nino had cleaned up roughly and put on a new shirt, judging by its bloodless state. "You need to shower before I look at your injuries. I can start with her."

Nestore pushed me gently back and made room for Nino to enter, but always kept his body between the other guy and me. "I'll be present when you treat Amelia."

"If we meant you or her harm, we would already have caused it, Nestore."

"I'll stay."

Nino held out a heap of unfamiliar clothes. "I took them from your stepmother. Your father burned your belongings."

I swallowed my sadness. Not so much about the clothes, but about the two photographs of my mother and me. "Thanks," I said as I took the clothes and returned to the bathroom.

As expected, the clothes were too big. Flavia had more curves than I did, but she was five feet five like me, so at least they weren't too long. I

picked a wrap dress that I could bind tightly so it wouldn't slip off me. The panties were loose but stayed in place. When I emerged from the bathroom, Nestore took me in as if I were an apparition. I flushed.

"Let me look at your wrist," Nino said, unimpressed. I held it out despite Nestore's sudden tension. He shadowed Nino as he grabbed my arm. I bit my lower lip at the pain in my wrist and cried out when he moved it up and down.

Nestore released a sound that could only be described as a growl and raised the bone a couple of inches.

Nino cocked an eyebrow. "I have to check her injuries. Pain is inevitable. I assure you, attacking me with a bone won't do you any favors. I advise you to sharpen and treat it with a fixative to preserve and harden it before putting it to use."

I blinked at the absurdity of the situation, but sank my teeth deeper into my lip when Nino twisted my hand again. "It's definitely broken and has been mended wrongly due to a lack of treatment. I need to break it again and then fix it with a cast for it to heal properly."

A tremor went through me at the prospect of more pain.

"I won't allow you to hurt her," Nestore rasped.

"I'll inject her with something for the pain."

"It's okay," I said. "I want it to heal properly. I can handle a little pain." I wasn't really sure. After eight months in the basement, I just wanted to be free of pain. I wanted to be free. Free to go where I pleased, eat what I pleased, sleep when I pleased. Freedom.

Though who was I to complain, considering that Nestore had suffered so much worse than I had?

Nino checked my other wounds, mainly bruises and smaller cuts where the belting had split my skin, before he gave me something for the pain in my wrist. "This will help you to sleep. To treat this accurately, I need to take you to a place where I can perform X-rays and have the proper equipment. I'd wait until the morning. One day more won't change the healing progress."

Nino glanced at Nestore, who still hovered beside us, covered in grime and blood, and clutching the bone. "You should shower so I can treat your wounds."

"Maybe I can see Flavia in the meantime?"

“No,” Nino and Nestore said in unison.

I moved toward the window and peered outside. The gardens were unkept. The maze had grown out of control, thorny tendrils rambling across the entrance, reaching into the sky and out to the sides, like spindly arms. A few bodies littered the lawn.

“Will you be okay?” Nestore asked quietly.

“Yes. Take a shower.” I just wanted Nestore to finally drop my father’s bone. Maybe getting rid of all the blood would help him return to himself, to let the beast he’d unleashed against the guard and my father lie dormant.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Nestore disappear into the bathroom, but he left the door ajar so he could hear any sounds of distress from me. Nino looked quite strong and capable with violence, so I didn’t want Nestore to engage in any fights, especially not while his body was still so broken.

A shift to my left made me tense. Nino appeared in my line of vision but still gave me a wide berth. The hairs at the nape of my neck rose.

“You don’t have to fear me. My brothers and I want our territory, and we’ll protect those who stand loyal by our side. Soon, Nestore will have the power to protect you and his other possessions, and you won’t have to fear anyone ever again.”

“I’m not a possession,” I said, bristling at the suggestion. I had felt like a possession of my father all my life, like something he could do with as he pleased. I wanted to belong to myself. I wanted to belong to Nestore too, but because I gifted myself to him, not because he owned me.

“He regards you as his, and I got the impression that he won’t let anyone take you from him. Do you think you’d be free to go if you so desired?”

I frowned. “Nestore loves me.”

Nino tilted his head as if what I said was curious and didn’t make sense. “Is he still capable of such a thing?”

Such a thing. He made it sound as if it were something useless, almost like a superstition he couldn’t understand. “Now that he’s out of his prison, he’ll heal.”

Nino gave me a look that made it clear he thought I was wrong. “Some things heal, but they alter what was there.”

I wrapped my arms around myself. My wrist didn’t hurt anymore. The painkillers had finally taken effect.

“You want him to be a monster, don’t you?”

Nino’s expression remained emotionless. “It’s what he is.”

“He’s not.” I swallowed because he had acted like a monster today. “It’s not his fault.”

“I didn’t say it was. Nothing’s wrong with who he’s become. If it is for you, leave. If he lets you.”

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CHAPTER EIGHT

As I emerged from the shower, clean for the first time in forever, I felt reborn. My body still ached with past injuries, but those would heal. Soon, I'd be stronger than ever, and then I'd get revenge on every person who had wronged my family and me, but especially on those who had wronged Amelia. I took Lamorgese's bone from the heap of my old clothes, turned it in my hand. I could still hear his howls of agony as I ripped it from his living flesh, remembering the look of terror in his eyes. Now that I knew the taste of power, the heady sensations linked to it, I would never give it up again.

I would take the place I was destined for. I would rule over this city. I would stand loyal by Remo Falcone's side and ruin our enemies. He had given me back my purpose. He had given me Lamorgese, and for that, I'd always be grateful.

Among the clothes Nino had handed Amelia were a black shirt and black jeans for me. They must have been his or Remo's, considering the pants weren't too short for me. I was taller than all the other men, except for the two Falcones. I didn't put on the shirt. I didn't like the feel of the fabric

on the many scars on my back and chest. I liked the feeling of air on them. I wasn't ashamed of them, even if they were proof of my weakness. They were also part of my strength because I had survived.

When I returned to the bedroom, Amelia remained standing in front of the window. Her strawberry-blond hair curled at the ends as it dried in the air. She looked petite and young. She looked so much younger than the two years that separated us. One day, she'd be my wife, but not yet. I needed to make sure my enemies were dead or as good as, so I could give her the life she deserved.

Nino stood by the door with enough distance from Amelia. She glanced over her shoulder at me, blue eyes taking in my bare chest, trailing down my arm to my hand, in which I held her father's bone. She shuddered. Amelia was kind. She was sensitive. Eight months in the basement hadn't changed who she was. She dwelled in the light while I had been sucked into the dark.

Nino took in my scars. A burn wound on my back, below my shoulder, was festering. I had seen it in the mirror in the bathroom. "That needs immediate treatment to prevent blood poisoning. It'll leave a scar, but given the state of your body, I doubt one more matters to you."

"It doesn't," I confirmed.

"Do you want something for the pain? Cleaning the wound will be very unpleasant."

"No. I can handle the pain."

I didn't want anything to dull my senses, even if that meant being spared pain. Amelia turned around with acute worry written across her pretty, pale face.

I gritted my teeth when Nino began to clean the wound, not making a sound. It had become almost impossible for Lamorgese to draw out screams from me, something I was proud of. I never wanted Amelia to hear my screams again. The sun had set behind her, the sky glowing in the last hues of red and orange before black would claim them too.

Nino treated my wounds for an hour, counting off the many healed fractures, guessing how I'd sustained certain scars, and always being right. When he finally left, silence fell over Amelia and me.

"Go to bed," I told her. "I'll keep watch."

"You need to sleep too."

I shook my head. I was free now, but I knew I wouldn't be in my nightmares. I'd relive the horrors of the past. I didn't want that now. I didn't want to feel powerless, not even in a scenario made up in my mind.

Amelia disappeared in the bathroom and emerged in a simple white cotton nightgown. In the endless hours in my cell, I'd imagined kissing Amelia once we were free. I had imagined doing more. But I wanted things to go right. I wanted us to be married before we took another step. I wanted Amelia to be of age. I wanted my power to be unwavering and my body to be strong and healed. I wanted Amelia to have left the horrors behind, even if I couldn't.

Until then, she'd be mine, yet she couldn't be. I'd wait until the time was right.

"I don't understand the look in your eyes," she said with a small, uncertain smile.

"I'm just trying to believe that this is reality."

"It is." She stretched out on the bed, then curled up on her side, releasing a small sigh. "Are you sure you don't want to join me?"

I moved closer and perched on the edge of the bed. I stroked my palm over her hair. "Sleep tight. I'll keep the monsters at bay."

Her eyelids fluttered. Before she fell asleep, she murmured, "Please don't become one of them."

I wished I could give her that promise, but I was already one of them.

I had fallen asleep in the early morning but had woken after an hour from a nightmare that had replayed the first weeks in Lamorgese's hands, when my body hadn't been used to torture yet, when Lamorgese still had been eager to create as much pain as possible for me, and when humiliation had been constant.

I reached for *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* beneath the bed, only to realize it wasn't there. I wasn't in my cell, and I hadn't taken it with me when I'd fled.

I needed to get my book, but the idea of entering the basement left my heart racing with terror. Sweat drenched my skin as I walked into the bathroom for another shower. Amelia's sleep had been fitful too, and she'd woken screaming twice, but now she was sound asleep. After the shower, I dressed in the pants again and left the room, locking the door after me to make sure Amelia was safe.

The hallways were as I remembered them, the hardwood floor the same dark walnut. I'd walked these halls countless times, yet today felt like the first time in many ways.

I considered going to the kitchen for breakfast or into the ballroom, where Nino, Remo, and Niccolo had spent the night with their other men, but instead, my feet carried me toward the basement. I hesitated on the staircase that led into the shadows. Cold sweat broke out on my skin, and my breath quickened as the memories crept up on me, and fear threatened to take over.

I forced my body forward, took one step after the other until the familiar stench of blood, sweat, and urine filled my nose. After hours in the light, my eyes had trouble getting accustomed to the dim light again, and it took a bit for the door that led to the cellblock to take form before me. I gripped the handle, once again overcome with panic. I stifled the sensation and opened the door. After another deep breath, I stepped into the cellblock where the stench of decay, of misery, and death clung to everything. It was a smell that seemed to fester under my skin. Even several showers hadn't changed that.

Two men stood guard beside the door. One of them was Niccolo, whose expression twisted with surprise upon seeing me.

"Nestore, what are you doing here?"

I scanned the five cells. In the three years I'd spent down here, I had rarely had company except for Amelia. Now, every cell was filled with at least two prisoners. Every cell except for the one at the end. My old cell.

Niccolo touched my shoulder. I tensed in anticipation of pain. Touch had always meant agony in the past, unless Amelia had touched me. He dropped his hand at a look from me. "He's in there. Nino patched him up, so he survived the amputation."

I nodded, gathering my courage before I strolled past the four other cells. The prisoners gave me looks of trepidation. Many of them had been

part of my torture. Every one of them would regret the day they decided to lay a hand on me.

I arrived at the end of the corridor. Lamorgese was stretched out on the pallet against the wall. A drip was inserted in the back of his hand. His pallor was ashen, his eyes closed. For a heart-stopping moment, I worried he was dead, then I noticed the shallow rise and fall of his chest. “You won’t die today. Or tomorrow.”

He tilted his head to the side, eyelids peeling open. “If you keep cutting limbs off, I’ll be gone by the end of the week.” His sneer spiked my rage.

I raised the bone. “This will be turned into a dagger. I can’t wait to test it on you.”

Trepidation filled his face as he stared at something that had been part of his body not too long ago. “I killed your family. I stole three years of your life from you. I saw you shit and pee yourself in agony, saw you throw up other people’s shit, and beg for mercy like a baby. You can’t get even, Nestore. You’d have to start by killing Amelia, and you can’t. You’re too weak to do what it takes.”

I bared my teeth, rage burning me up. “Amelia will be my wife, and she will rule over my kingdom with me while you rot in this cell. I have years to pay you back, and I will.”

I turned to Niccolo and held out my hand. He gave me the key without a word. The brief flicker of compassion on his face made me furious. I didn’t want to be pitied. I wanted to be feared.

I unlocked the cage, noting with satisfaction how Lamorgese flinched. I strode toward the bed, then got down on my knee and reached for the book beneath it. When my fingers closed around the leather cover, I relaxed. I straightened with the book in my hand.

Lamorgese watched me with furrowed brows.

I turned. There was still too much to do before I could focus on him, and I was still too caught up in everything that had happened down here. If I wanted to maintain the upper hand during our encounters, I needed to leave the weak, broken part of me behind and really embrace the darkness I could feel knocking.

I left the basement, ignoring Niccolo’s attempt to talk to me. I wasn’t sure if I could forgive him for taking three years to come for me. Part of me

was glad he was alive, but another envied the life he'd been allowed to live while I had gone through hell.

I found Nino and Remo in the kitchen, eating breakfast. The staff had prepared omelets. They had worked for my father before they'd worked for Lamorgese. They didn't care who they served eggs to. I wasn't sure I wanted to keep them.

I sat across from the two Falcones.

"Make him an omelet," Remo ordered one of the cooks. Marla was her name, and she'd been working here since before my birth. "I see you're as averse to wearing shirts as I usually am."

"What are your plans?" I asked, cutting to the chase. I had no intention of discussing how sensitive my skin was to the feel of fabric, thanks to all the scars. Considering the number of scars on his body, he probably knew.

"What are yours?" Remo asked, cocking an eyebrow. It was split by a scar.

I leaned back. With less than twenty-four hours of freedom, I should give my body time to rest. I should spend time with Amelia. But restlessness had taken hold of me. I wanted to solidify my power and prevent something like Lamorgese from happening ever again.

"I'll take the tattoo today and officially become one of your Underbosses. Then I'll have this house cleaned until every trace of Lamorgese and his traitorous men is wiped away. After that, I'll fight by your side to kill whoever needs to be killed to make sure you stay Capo, and I stay Underboss."

A satisfied smile broke across Remo's face. "I'm impressed. I wasn't sure you'd be able to handle responsibility so soon, but your determination and hunger for revenge are perfect tools for our purposes."

"Is California under your rule?"

Remo shrugged. "Close. San Diego still holds the fort. From what I hear, the Underboss there is preparing everything to leave the sinking ship."

"Will you let him?" I asked neutrally.

"No. Rats need to be poisoned, or they'll propagate."

"Agreed." I'd spend each waking hour in my life to hunt every last traitor and person who'd wronged me. I wouldn't rest until they'd all paid the ultimate price for what they'd done.

“In the afternoon, Fabiano, my enforcer, will join us to oversee how you receive your tattoo, and tomorrow morning, we’ll leave for San Diego to kill everyone who supported the wrong Capo. You are cordially invited to join us.”

“What about your two younger brothers?” He hadn’t mentioned them. Perhaps he’d really killed them to rise to power. If that were the case, I’d have to be even more careful around Remo.

Something in his face shifted, a warning bell that told me all I needed to know. Protectiveness and fury battled in his dark eyes. “They aren’t your concern yet.”

I gave a terse nod. “Who makes sure none of the prisoners in my basement get killed or escape? They are mine to punish.”

“Your cousin Niccolo and a couple of my men will stay back.”

“Amelia needs to be safe. People need to know that she’s mine and that I’ll kill anyone who dares to lay a hand on her.”

“I’ll tell my men. You won’t have to worry about her.” He paused, eagerness filling his face. “The only thing you need to focus on is to be exactly who you are. The man who ripped a throat out with his bare teeth. That story will make you notorious.”

I hardly remembered biting into the guard’s neck, only the rush of adrenaline in my veins and pure rage lighting up my insides.

When I watched Nestore receive the Camorra tattoo this afternoon, some of the hope I'd harbored for a life away from all the violence died. Nestore didn't show a flicker of pain when Nino touched the tattoo needle to his forearm. I stood off to the side while the men loyal to the Falcones had gathered in a circle around Nestore.

Nestore was determined to do Remo's bidding, to kill and maim on his behalf. Nestore hungered for violence in a way that terrified me. I could see it in every angle of his face. Nestore had hurt so much, and now he wanted to see others suffer.

I wasn't sure how to make him see that a life existed beyond the anguish and pain. I wanted us to have a future without the darkness that stained our past.

Maybe it was still too soon. Maybe Nestore needed this to move past what had happened. I didn't want him to leave in the morning, but I knew I couldn't stop him.

Eventually, I turned away from the inking, unsure what to do. Niccolo appeared by my side, making me jump. I didn't know him very well.

"Remo will allow you to visit your stepmother and stepbrother. I'll take you to them." Surprise washed over me. I had asked him several times, so I wondered why he would let me see them now, of all times. Maybe he didn't want a woman present when Nestore was inducted.

Niccolo took me to one of the guest bedrooms on the upper floor. My belly tightened when he opened the door, worried about what I might find behind it.

Flavia perched on the sofa, breastfeeding her son. Niccolo's expression twisted with discomfort at the scene. "I'll wait in front of the door." He left without another word.

Flavia scoffed. "Nothing drives away men faster than the sight of a baby feeding from a breast."

I walked over to her, noting with relief that she had a tablet with food on her bedside table. I sank down beside her. My heart swelled, and my eyes filled with tears at the sight of my little brother for the first time. He was a chubby little thing, with dark hair and tiny fingers and toes. He was perfect.

Flavia gave me a soft smile. "When he's done eating, you can hold him if you want?"

I nodded, my throat clogging with emotions. "How are you?"

She scanned me from head to toe, lingering on my bandaged wrist. “That’s a question I should ask. Are you safe?”

“Safer than before.”

“The Falcones reign brutally over their territory.”

“They’re at war. Wars are always brutal.”

“Some men never return mentally from war.”

“I’m just happy that Nestore’s suffering is over, that he gets a chance to live.”

She stroked the dark hair of her baby, a soft smile tugging at her lips. When she looked back up, her eyes were serious. “Is he dead?”

“Father? No. He’s down in a cell. Nestore…Nestore wants to torture him before he kills him.”

Flavia swallowed. “I wish he were dead.”

“So do I. Not just for you and me, but also for Nestore. I worry what it’ll do to him if he is consumed by revenge.”

“It’s hard to move on from what he’s survived, Amelia. Maybe he can’t. Perhaps you need to let him go.”

My eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

“Maybe you should leave this manor, this life, and all the darkness clinging to it. I won’t stay.”

My heart sank. “You’re going away?”

“Yes. I told Remo Falcone everything I knew when he came by this morning, and he told me I could leave. He doesn’t seem too concerned about releasing women. He doesn’t consider me a threat to his power.”

Sadness overcame me. “You’re really leaving?”

She touched my hand with a soft smile. “Come with me. I’m sure Remo won’t care.”

Maybe Remo wouldn’t, but Nestore most definitely would. He’d never let me go. I had promised him to stay, and I couldn’t imagine being without him, but I couldn’t deny it. He had scared me on occasion in the last twenty-four hours. Though that wasn’t even why I felt the deep desire to leave. These walls seemed to whisper about the past. I heard them at night or when I closed my eyes. It felt like I was still their captive.

“You don’t have to decide now. We’ll stay for a few more days to give things time to calm down. I want all of your father’s men out of the way before I’m seen in public.”

Niccolo took me back down an hour later, but we never made it to the ballroom before Nestore came our way, eyebrows drawn together and eyes harsh with suspicion. “Where did you take her?”

“To her stepmother on Remo’s orders,” Niccolo said.

Nestore touched my waist, worry clouding his expression as he met my gaze. “Are you okay?”

“I am. I just had a chat with Flavia. I needed to make sure she and the baby were all right.” I lowered my gaze to the tattoo on the inside of his forearm. The skin around it was an angry red. The eye on the hilt of the blade was puckered because of a burn scar there. “Now you’re a Camorrista.”

“A Camorrista and Underboss, as was my destiny all along.”

“I thought you’d have to be of age to take the position.”

Nestore shrugged. “It’s only a few more days. Nobody will care about age if I prove myself.”

How? I wanted to ask, but I was too scared of the answer.

I woke with a start. Suppressed screams filled the room. I turned on the light and blinked against the sudden brightness until Nestore came into focus on the floor beside the bed. He must have slept down there if the pillow and blanket were any indication. His muffled screams were the result of him pressing his forearm into his mouth, teeth drawing blood as he screamed in agony. It was a nightmare, but too close to what he’d really endured to make me feel sick. Tears sprang to my eyes and trickled down my cheeks.

I leaned over the edge of the bed and grasped his shoulder. “Nestore! Wake up!”

With a start, his eyes shot open, haunted and terrified, his expression almost boyish in its terror. He lowered his arm from his lips. The bite marks remained.

“You had a bad dream.”

He blinked slowly. “A dream.” He closed his eyes and shuddered. “It didn’t feel like one.” He gripped his head, fingers digging into the skin. “He’s in there. I want him out. I want them all out.”

“I know.”

His eyes narrowed, and he shoved to his feet. I jerked back in surprise. He wore only black sweatpants. Without a word, he stalked toward the door and left. I stumbled out of bed and chased him. I had trouble keeping up with him. When he disappeared through the door that led down into the basement, I stumbled to a halt. My heart threatened to jump out of my chest when I thought about going down there. It was a place I never wanted to see again. The walls of the hallway seemed to close in on me.

Nestore was down there.

He had survived so many more horrors.

I forced my feet to move despite my racing pulse and tightening belly, and when I finally arrived in the basement, the two guards didn’t stop me. I hovered near the stairwell, unable to move farther as the familiar stench of dankness, feces, and decay flooded my nose.

Nestore opened the cell beside my father, stepped in, and threw it shut with a resounding bang.

What was he doing?

The two prisoners in the cell with him were both men who’d picked him up for torture regularly. Nestore’s chest heaved with every deep breath, his expression entirely alien in its ferocity.

He sucked in an even deeper breath, cracked his neck, and his eyes came to rest on one of the men. His lip curled, and he lunged.

Nestore was like a wild animal as he clawed, punched, and kicked with a speed and force that took the heavier man by surprise and sent him tumbling to the ground. Nestore sank his teeth into the man’s cheek, then jerked back with a piece of flesh in his mouth. I covered my mouth with my hand as I watched Nestore once again become a monster. The first man’s life ended when Nestore rammed his fingers into his eyes.

I couldn’t bear it anymore, but before I turned my back on the scene, I caught my father’s gaze. His expression was a mix of disgust and horror, then quickly morphed to pleading. Did he hope I’d help him escape?

He had turned Nestore into this bloodthirsty creature, and I’d never forgive him for it. I’d never forgive him for all that he’d made Nestore suffer. Even my own suffering took second place to that. Maybe I could have forgiven him for my pain, but never for Nestore.

The door upstairs swung open, and Remo and a tall blond guy named Fabiano appeared at the top, backlit by light from the foyer. They stalked down the staircase and then entered the cellblock next to me. I still hadn’t felt the courage to move away from the mouth of the stairwell, my way to escape this place.

Fabiano motioned at Nestore, who sank his teeth into the man over and over again. “Fuck this shit, Remo. This is a level of unhinged that I don’t think we can control. That guy is on the verge of becoming a cannibalistic serial killer.”

“As long as he eats our enemies, I don’t see a problem.”

Did they find this funny? “Stop it,” I gritted out despite my fear of these two men, but over time, fear dulled, and six months down here had definitely dampened mine. “He’s not eating them. He’s obviously hurting.”

Cool blue eyes locked on mine. “Some people also think a dog that bites their hand off is a misunderstood creature. I would put a bullet in its head.”

I risked another glimpse over my shoulder. Both prisoners in the cell were dead, and Nestore stood over their bodies, covered in blood.

“I told you he’s evolving,” Remo said.

“He needs help, not encouragement.”

Remo’s smile became hard. “Whatever you want to see in him, it’s a fairy tale that’s not going to happen, girl. Run as long as you can.”

They moved toward Nestore, but I left.

I couldn’t bear another second of this. I rushed out. My breath came in short bursts as I sprinted up the stairs. It was the middle of the night, or I would have gone to Flavia. Instead, I went to my bedroom, to *our* bedroom, and cried myself to sleep.

I woke to the sound of steps and quickly sat up, then turned on the light. Nestore stood in the room, covered in blood, with a haunted look on his face.

I shuddered out a breath and pushed out of bed, crossing the distance between us. He gazed down upon me, his lips covered in blood. “Nestore,” I whispered. “You have to stop. All this rage and revenge will drag you even deeper into darkness. Please come into the light with me.”

Nestore gave me a bitter smile. “There’s only darkness where I am. I crave revenge. I crave their screams, and I won’t be sated until every last one of them has perished. I can’t.” He brushed my cheek with his fingertips in a featherlight touch. “You are my light. You remind me of my past self, of a time before the darkness consumed me.”

“You can leave the darkness.”

Nestore lowered his hand and didn’t say anything. His expression told me he didn’t think he could. Maybe he didn’t even want to.

“I can’t bear all this darkness, Nestore. I prayed every night for the past three years that we would both find a way to escape this place, and now you want to stay. Why? I don’t understand.”

“I won’t leave. This is my home.”

“Is it really? After everything that’s happened?”

A shadow passed his eyes, but his expression remained hard and stoic. “It is the place I inherited from my father, the home of us, Romanos. It’s the place from where I’ll rule over my territory. I won’t let memories chase me out of my own home. I’m stronger than the ghosts of my past.”

Was he? Then why was he so desperate to exact the most brutal revenge?

His gaze flickered with trepidation. “You promised to stay by my side. We promised each other our firsts, remember?”

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. “I do. I want to stay by your side.”

I also wanted to escape this place with a despaired longing that threatened to crush me. Relief crossed Nestore’s face.

I returned to bed, heartbroken and unable to fall back asleep, while Nestore disappeared into the bathroom. Nestore emerged clean and dressed in sweatpants fifteen minutes later and stretched out on the blanket on the floor.

“You can come to bed, you know?” My pulse quickened. After what I’d witnessed in the basement, a tiny part of me feared the man Nestore was becoming.

“This is more familiar, and I won’t share a bed with you until we’re married.”

Marriage. I had dreamed of marrying Nestore, but in my fantasies, he had always been smiling like the boy at his fifteenth birthday party.

Would I ever see this version of him again?

In the following three weeks, Nestore went on missions with Remo and Nino. I heard the hushed whispers from Niccolo and the other guards who had remained to keep watch over me about how brutally Nestore killed his enemies. They called him the Madman of LA in revered and horrified whispers. Every time he came back, more darkness had consumed him. Every time he returned, my heart broke a little more for the boy he once was. I wasn’t stupid. I knew he’d harbored darkness back then, too, but it had been contained. It hadn’t drowned out everything else like it did now.

And since Flavia had left the mansion to live in Santa Barbara, I felt even more trapped in my own despair and the past.

The worst days were the ones when he went down to the basement to torture my father and the other prisoners. On those days, I could barely look into his eyes, at the ferocious hunger for bloodshed in them.

On one of those nights, Nestore returned covered in blood as usual, and something broke inside me. Every time he went down there, I too went down mentally. I couldn’t stop myself from joining him in the dank basement in my mind, and every time I did, I felt small and powerless and filled with terror. I didn’t want to feel like that anymore.

I stood in front of him, crying. “Please stop this, Nestore. I can’t bear this anymore. This house harbors too many horrors. I need to leave for a little while. Flavia told me I could visit her in Santa Barbara.”

Nestore gripped my shoulders with blood-covered hands, his eyes frantic. “You promised not to leave.”

“Just for a little—”

“No, do you hear me? I won’t let you leave. You belong here. By my side. You’re mine, Amelia. You are my light. You are the reason I’m alive.”

He released me and stalked into the bathroom. Bloody handprints marked my skin and nightgown where he’d grabbed me. A wave of nausea and despair washed over me. I was the reason he was still alive, but I felt like I was dying a little more every day I spent in these haunted walls and witnessed Nestore’s descent into utter darkness.

Nestore wanted me to be his light, an anchor to the boy he’d once been and that he’d lost, but the girl who’d shone brightly enough to be all that he desired had been lost, too. And the small flicker of her light that had persevered would be snuffed out under the force of Nestore’s darkness.

Nestore would never let me go, but I couldn’t stay.

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CHAPTER NINE

I hugged my arms tightly around my legs as I stared bleakly into the darkness. It was early in the morning. The sky was slowly turning gray and orange, but the fragile rays didn't reach the inside of the room yet.

I had been awake for hours. I couldn't fall back asleep. Without Nestore in the same room with me, I hardly slept at all. Nestore was gone on another mission with Remo, Nino, and Niccolo—purging San Diego of the remaining rats, as they called it—when I decided to risk running.

The walls seemed to whisper Father's cruel words. *Worthless bitch. You'll die down here. Nobody will remember you.*

I felt like I would never be happy again, like the will to even try was slowly trickling out of me with every moment that I spent in this house.

Nestore wouldn't leave. He felt at home in the darkness. He seemed to think it was making him stronger, but it was sucking the energy out of me.

I closed my eyes tightly, and a few tears squeezed out. I wished I could say goodbye, but Nestore wasn't someone who would ever accept my goodbye. He'd force me to stay, but I couldn't, not even another day. I felt like I was about to combust.

My chest had been tight for days, making every breath laborious, and sometimes I couldn’t breathe at all. I needed to leave.

I opened my eyes. I had made my decision a couple of days ago, but I had wanted to stay to celebrate Nestore’s eighteenth birthday in two days. Now I realized it wouldn’t make things easier for him, and it would make things impossibly harder for me.

I slipped out of bed, already dressed in comfortable jeans and a T-shirt. The staff bought me a couple of clothes last week because Nestore didn’t want me to leave the house yet. It was still my prison.

I had considered calling Flavia to let her know I was coming, but then I worried that our calls might be monitored.

I needed to get away from the bloodshed, the screams, and the memories of pain and misery. Nestore wanted to stay to prove a point. My Nestore was on a path I couldn’t follow. The few guards who had stayed to protect me were playing cards in the kitchen. It was their nightly ritual and usually involved the consumption of quite a bit of wine.

I knew the security system from living here, and Nestore had given me all the codes I needed. Nestore trusted me to stay, and I felt guilty for not being able to. But I needed to leave. As long as Nestore was still so caught up with revenge, I couldn’t stay here. Maybe in a few months, when he’d calmed down, I could return to him. But not to this place, never to this place. It wasn’t a home, only a graveyard and a prison.

I didn’t pack anything except for two dresses, some underwear, and a couple of hundred dollars. I didn’t own anything, and even if I did, I wanted to leave the past behind. I didn’t want to be reminded of what I’d left behind and the things that were irrevocably lost. With a heavy heart, I snuck off the premises. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I turned my back on the massive gates. Like the walls, the gates were covered in rambling roses. It was such a beautiful sight, which made the horrors behind those gates even worse. Without looking back, I ran as fast as my legs could carry me. Down and down, I put more distance between myself and the house that had been my prison for too long.

I could barely breathe because of my crying, but at the same time, the vise around my chest seemed to loosen the farther away from the mansion I got. People were giving me a wide berth as if I were contagious. When would Nestore return to the manor? And how would he react when he

realized I was gone? I cried even harder because of my betrayal. I wished I were strong enough to brave the darkness that Nestore harbored, but after everything I had seen, I simply needed to leave. There was so much despair and darkness inside me. Too much, and this place made me feel like there was no light at all.

I didn't stop crying until I sat inside the Greyhound bus that would take me up to Santa Barbara. I pressed my cheek against the glass and wiped the back of my hand over my eyes, sucking in a deep breath. The engine of the bus sprang to life, and for a moment, I considered exiting, but I couldn't move. My heart begged me to return to the mansion, but my mind and body refused to listen.

I arrived at Flavia's apartment in Santa Barbara that evening. I hadn't given her a heads-up, so her expression of shock when she opened the door was expected.

"I hope I didn't wake Luciano," I said with a shaky smile, feeling tears rise into my eyes.

Flavia blinked at me. "Amelia, what's going on?"

"I ran. I couldn't stay anymore." A tremor went through my body, and I began to cry in earnest. Flavia wrapped an arm around me and pulled me into her small apartment, then into the living area, where she made me sit down on the comfy beige couch.

"Tell me everything. Luciano probably won't wake for another hour, so we have time."

I told her everything, sobbing through every word until I fell silent, exhausted and drained. I wasn't sure if I had made sense. My emotions were a jumbled mess. She caressed my hair as I watched the baby on the video monitor, lying on his back, sucking on his pacifier, looking perfectly peaceful.

She looked around the apartment. "We can't stay here. He won't let you leave, Amelia. He'll come looking for you and drag you back to that godforsaken place."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have dragged you into this." I began to get up, but Flavia gripped my arm and tugged me back down.

"Don't be stupid. We're in this together."

"I can't expect you to move again."

She shook her head. “I was thinking of leaving the state anyway. We can do it together. Let’s get packing.”

The following morning, we left the apartment and Santa Barbara with no final destination in mind. All we knew was that we wanted to leave not just California but also the Camorra territory behind. If we wanted any chance of staying undetected, we needed to get as far away as possible.

I wondered if Nestore had found my letter by now and if he would ever forgive me.

Was he still capable of forgiveness?

Almost every thought of mine in the past three years had involved Amelia. Since the evening I’d seen her for the first time, looking way too innocent and kind to be anywhere near Falcone, my father, and even her father. Her blue eyes had beckoned me to protect her, something I’d never felt for anyone.

To this day, I wanted to protect her.

And now she was gone.

Niccolo had told me on the phone after her guards had called him, too scared of me. I couldn’t believe it, even now as I peered down at the note she had left for me on her bed.

My heart thundered in my chest as I picked up the piece of paper and scanned Amelia’s elegant handwriting.

My Nestore,

I know you won't understand my decision. I had to leave. Every moment in this haunted house robbed me of my happiness. It's full of horrid memories. The walls echo with our past screams, with misery and pain. I can't bear a day longer under this roof.

I wish you could have come with me, but you can't. You are on a path of self-destruction that breaks my heart. I wish I could save you. I wish our liberation had been that for you, but you aren't free of the demons of your past. You want to chase them when, instead, they are chasing you.

This isn't goodbye for good. This is a "see you later". One day, we'll be reunited. When you've made peace with yourself and left the past behind. I miss my Nestore. I know he's still in there. I can't wait to see him again one day.

With love,
Amelia

I let out a roar as my heart seemed to splinter into a million pieces inside my chest and ripped the letter apart, unable to read it a second time. Amelia was gone. She'd left me.

She’d betrayed the promise she’d given me. My vision turned black at the edges, and pain unlike anything I had ever experienced filled my chest. I screamed again and began to destroy everything around me. My fists and feet smashed against wood and plaster, and tore at curtains and slashed through canvas, but the pain remained.

Eventually, I sank to my knees amid the rubble of furniture and breathed harshly. I ran a hand over my face, and it came away wet. Tears. I didn’t know I still had them in me. Rage bubbled up and banished the sorrow. How could she leave me? She had been by my side for three years, had risked her life and given her freedom for me, and now that we were both free and I had the power to protect her, she ran?

“Nestore?”

I glared at Niccolo, who hovered in the doorway with a look of uncertainty on his face.

“She left.”

He nodded. “I told you.”

“I’ll bring her back. I’ll find her.”

“She could be anywhere. She doesn’t have a phone or credit cards we could track.”

“I’ll catch her. Tell every soldier in my territory to look for her. I won’t rest until I have her.”

“You need to show your men that you’re capable of leading them. You’ve only been an Underboss for three weeks. You are young, and people will think they can take what’s yours. Remo expects you to rule over California for him. He won’t understand it if you fail because you’re chasing a girl.”

She wasn’t just a girl. “I won’t fail. I’ll rule, and I’ll kill whoever doubts me, but I won’t give up Amelia. She is mine.”

Rage for the guards who’d let her escape rushed through me. “Set up death fights with the men who failed to protect Amelia. They’ll fight me.”

“It’ll be done.”

“But we need to find her. I won’t rest until she’s mine again. I can’t.”

Niccolo scanned the room again, then released a sigh. “I’ll tell everyone we’re looking for her. Do you have a photo of her?”

I froze. I didn’t. There wasn’t a single photo of Amelia and me. And all the old pictures of her had been burned by her father. Not a single one could

be found in the entire house.

“I don’t have one,” I murmured, my heart clenching. An image of her played vividly in my head. “Bring me an artist who can do portraits. He needs to create a drawing of her that we can use to send to my men.”

“I never told you happy birthday on turning eighteen, Nestore.” Niccolo took a step back, hesitating, then turned and left.

I had turned eighteen while fighting at Remo’s side and had forgotten my birthday. I had celebrated my last three birthdays with Amelia. Even locked in a cell, my birthday had been better than this one simply because Amelia had been there. I pressed my face into my hands. I hadn’t seen Amelia in four days. Who knew how much longer I wouldn’t get to see her?

I stumbled to my feet, filled with resolve. While locked in the musty basement, I had lived because I had dreamed about a future with Amelia, about a life with her by my side, of her as my wife. I wouldn’t let anyone take that future from me, not even Amelia.

She’d become my wife whether she wanted it or not.

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CHAPTER TEN

20 years old

Eight hundred and one days without Amelia.

Eight hundred and one days of searching for her.

Nineteen thousand, two-hundred and twenty-four hours.

One million, one hundred fifty-three thousand, four hundred, and forty seconds.

Too long.

And every second more was almost unbearable.

“It’s her,” I said as I stared down at the photo on my phone screen. A contact in Outfit territory had found her.

Sasha, my driver for the day, nodded. “We’re almost there, boss. Soon you’ll have her back.”

Almost there. My heart clenched. Nothing could go wrong now. I peered out of the window at the small corner flower shop where Amelia worked. I couldn’t look inside from my vantage point, but the men I had hired had assured me she was in there. They had kept an eye on her since this morning.

“What are you going to do with her?” Sasha asked. My head whipped around, and I narrowed my eyes at him. Regret passed his face, and he ducked his head. “None of my business. I apologize.”

Niccolo had asked me the same question this morning when we’d found out our search was finally over. I hadn’t been able to give him an answer. Rage had blinded me, but now I felt a potent mix of anger and longing.

Amelia would return to the mansion with me. She would never get the chance to run. She would be mine forever.

My heart pounded in my chest when I left the car. Passersby stopped to gawk at me, then quickened their pace after a look into my eyes.

I smirked. Slowly, I approached the shop windows. I was almost scared.

What if the Amelia I saw today wasn’t the Amelia I remembered and desired? The one who filled my dreams and nightmares? What if she’d become unrecognizable? She had looked the same in the photo, only more grown up and even more beautiful, but what if her core had changed, the very thing that had made her her?

I peered through the shop window, and my breath stalled in my chest when I spotted her. She was dressed too casually, in jeans and a shirt, but it did nothing to reduce her beauty. Her hair was still the beautiful red I remembered, and her blue eyes made my heart clench. She smiled at the customer.

She was still my Amelia. My dove. The reason for every breath I took.

And she was mine.

18 years old

My smile felt stiff as I showed the woman the bouquet my boss had created, with the additional flowers she'd requested. She was my last customer of the day. It was already ten minutes past six, and the store usually closed at six sharp, but she had come in a minute before closing time. She had started browsing the array of flowers on display, picking several she wanted added to the original bouquet, which wasn't easy since it had been intricately bound, and I usually only did smaller arrangements.

I was desperate to get home so I could relieve Flavia of watching Luciano. She had the night shift in the bar she worked in, so I had watch duty. We both worked long hours so we could afford the place we rented in Minneapolis. We had been in town for eight months, the longest we had stayed anywhere in the past twenty-six months. This place almost started to feel like a real home, as if we might be able to put down roots here. Sometimes I worried we shouldn't even think about making any place our longtime home, but both Flavia and I couldn't move anymore. We were exhausted from the constant running, plus it ate up too much of our hard-earned money. We both hoped the Camorra couldn't ever reach us here. That Nestore wouldn't find me.

My heart clenched thinking about him like it did every time he crossed my mind, which happened daily, but I still knew it was the right decision. My panic attacks had stopped despite our life on the run.

I dreamed about him every night. Sometimes those dreams were visions of a happy future we would never get, and sometimes they were nightmares filled with Nestore's rage and images from the past.

Sometimes I dreamed of finishing school, of opening my own floral store, of a bright future without fear of being caught. On occasion, I had searched the net and the darknet for information about Nestore, hoping to find something that would give me hope. But last time I had checked, six months ago, Nestore had fought in a cage in Las Vegas and brutally killed his opponent. His eyes had been full of bloodlust, rage, and madness. He'd terrified me.

After that, I had stopped looking. Nestore wasn't on a path into the light. He had gone further into the dark.

Because you left.

My belly turned with acute guilt, but I shoved it back. "Are you listening to a word I just said?" the woman seethed, eyes narrowed in reproach.

"I'm sorry. It's been a long day," I said with an apologetic smile.

She tossed her blond hair back. "That's hardly my problem."

The bell over the entrance rang as the door opened. I must have forgotten to turn the sign in the window that said we were closed. "I'm sorry—"

I felt the color drain from my face. My fingers went numb, and the bouquet fell to the floor, the binding bursting open and flowers spilling everywhere. Peruvian lilies, white hydrangea, red roses, and eucalyptus spread on the floor.

"What are you doing? You ruined my bouquet! I won't pay you a cent. And believe me when I tell you I'm leaving a scathing review. Because of you, I won't have a gift for my mother-in-law."

I was barely listening. I had trouble breathing. Everything around me seemed to still as I watched a familiar, impossibly tall form fill the entranceway. Was this reality? Or a daydream?

Nestore Romano stood in the flower shop, flanked by two muscled men dressed in all black. He was even more beautiful than I remembered. I didn't have a photo of him, but my memory hadn't done him justice. He was far more terrifying than I remembered, too. He towered over the two men flanking his sides.

He wore a long-sleeved black linen shirt, black pants, and black combat boots. His shoulders had broadened, and his muscles now defined his body. His face had sharpened and lost any boyish trace even though he had gained weight and no longer looked emaciated. He looked like a man who carried power, a man who wielded it without hesitation or mercy.

I swallowed thickly when his furious eyes met mine. Nestore had always gazed upon me with reverence and love. Now there was only triumph and fury. He had found me.

The woman followed my gaze, her brows furrowing. “It’s my turn.”

Nestore’s rageful gaze landed on her, and his lips curled with disdain. “Leave. Before I see if your blood is the same color as the roses on the floor.”

He stepped farther into the shop, opening up the doorway for her to leave.

The woman blinked, glanced at me, then she grabbed her purse from the counter and rushed outside, leaving me alone with Nestore. His men had stepped out and closed the door.

“Eight hundred and one days, Amelia,” he murmured in a voice that made the little hairs at the nape of my neck stand on edge. He took a couple of steps closer. I was frozen, barely able to breathe, overcome with fear. Nestore looked like a man out for revenge.

“Did you read my letter? I explained everything,” I whispered.

He bared his teeth. “I read it and tore it apart. You betrayed me.”

“I needed to leave. That house and your obsession with revenge were unbearable for me. I had constant panic attacks. The dark was swallowing me whole.”

His rage burned brighter. My words were making it worse, and I wasn’t sure what to say to make him understand. He bridged the distance between us, and the full force of his wrath washed over me in a wave of almost unbridled aggression. “Another Lamorgese who betrayed me.”

I shook my head. “I didn’t—” He took a step closer, and I backed away until my back hit the wall and Nestore towered over me like a wrathful Greek god.

“Don’t insult me by lying.”

I shivered. I wasn’t lying. I never meant to betray him. I simply couldn’t watch what he had become. It pained me to see him now when I

remembered who he was. He grabbed my chin between his forefinger and thumb, tilting it up so I was forced to meet his gaze. My skin tingled from the contact, as if whatever bond we'd shared was awakened by the simple touch. "Eight hundred and one days. Did you ever think of me?"

"Every day," I rasped, tears springing into my eyes.

"Every day," he echoed in a low, dark voice. His gaze traced my face, every line, as if he were trying to memorize it. "I didn't have a single photo of you. The only thing left of you was my memories. You have become so much more beautiful than what I remember."

"Did you think of me?" My voice shook with hope. What was I doing?

He grabbed my hands and pressed them against his temples, his gaze almost feverish with emotion. "Every fucking second of my existence. You are in here so deeply that even a drill couldn't get you out. Fuck, I've thought about drilling a hole into my head just to bleed out my obsession with you!"

He touched my palms to his chest over his heart. It pounded against my hand. "And you're in there, and the only reason it's still beating. You are a part of me, and I've come to realize that cutting you out of me would mean cutting out my heart and brain. You are and will always be my first thought in the morning and my last thought at night. You are the reason for everything, and because you are like a part of myself, you are and will always be mine."

Words crowded my throat. I didn't know what to say. He cradled my palms in his bigger hands and leaned down until we were at eye level, and the amber specks in his dark green irises became impossible to miss.

"Have you been with anyone else?"

I shook my head. "No, never." Even though I'd run from him, I hadn't really shaken off his shadow. Nestore had been with me all along. I had always hoped to return to him one day, even as my hope had diminished little by little over time, especially after the glimpse of his cage fight. When a man tried to flirt with me, Nestore's face had always popped to the forefront of my mind, a warning and a reminder of a promise I never wanted to break.

He bent low. "So your every first will be mine."

I swallowed at the raw possession in his voice. In the past, when we'd talked about sharing all of our firsts, he'd said it reverently, sweetly even,

not like I was a prize to claim. “What about you?” I asked, my heart in my throat.

It was stupid of me to even ask. Nestore was a man of power. An angry and vengeful man with power.

Nestore’s lips pulled into a cruel smile. “I fucked as many women as I could, fucked them in every way I could think of, always hoping that one of them would make me forget the sweetness of your kiss, Amelia. They couldn’t, and here I stand, still the slave of one Lamorgese.”

I shook my head slowly, my heart shattering. “We promised to have all of our firsts together,” I whispered.

“And you promised to stay.” Something shifted in his face, the dark bursting forth. “You ran,” he rasped, then snarled. “You ran.”

For a moment, he looked at me like he’d always looked at my father, with hatred and fear.

I understood the former, but not the latter. “Nestore,” I began, but he grabbed my throat. Not tight enough to cut off my air yet, but I got the warning.

I’d betrayed him. Betrayed the promise I’d given him. But that promise had been given to a boy whom Nestore had killed by torturing my father and slaughtering his other tormentors.

“I couldn’t stay,” I whispered. Nestore’s fingers tightened, his eyes darkening in a raging flood of anger.

“Now you will. I won’t let you run again, Amelia. Never again.”

I searched his eyes, searched for a hint of the boy I’d once loved, but he was gone.

Nestore sat in the back seat with me while his men took up the front. His gaze was stern and foreboding as he peered out of the window at the dark street beyond. We’d left Minneapolis behind an hour ago. I wasn’t sure whether we’d drive the entire way to LA or take a plane at some point.

Nestore hadn’t spoken a single word to me since he’d dragged me out of the flower shop and forced me into the black BMW limousine.

“Did you think I wouldn’t find you if you hid in Outfit territory?”

I jumped, turning to him. He leaned back, his head propped up against the window, eyes half lidded as if he had been sleeping, but the look in his eyes was too keen for that.

“I always thought I would return to you one day.”

“When, Amelia?”

I licked my lips. “When you were back to being Nestore from the past. When you were done seeking revenge, living for it.”

His upper lip curled in disgust. “I am who I need to be. I am the evolution of the weak boy I used to be.”

“You were never weak,” I whispered. “You survived under your father. You survived three years of my father’s torture! Evolution? Is that what Remo Falcone calls it?”

Nestore shook his head as if I couldn’t possibly understand what he meant. “Remo understands me. He understands what it means to be born from darkness, to live and breathe it.”

I reached for Nestore’s hand resting on his thigh. His gaze zeroed in on my fingers as they touched him, a look of weariness in it.

“I can’t just disappear from my current life.”

“You mean from Flavia? I know she helped you disappear.”

“Please don’t blame her. She wanted to protect me.”

“From me?” he growled, leaning forward with narrowed eyes.

I remained silent. Did I need protection from Nestore? In the past, I would have said no, but I wasn’t so sure anymore. The look in his eyes was terrifying. Whatever had protected me from his monster in the past had been destroyed by my running.

Eight hundred days and one day without Amelia. Not a day had passed that I hadn’t thought about her. Amelia was far more beautiful than I remembered. Watching her sleep beside me in the back seat, a peaceful look on her gorgeous face, I was torn between utter rage and admiration.

Sometimes I had almost given up hope that I would find her, but even when everyone told me to give her up, I had kept going. Giving up had never been an option. Amelia was too deep in my heart and head. Sometimes I truly hated her for it. I had shaken off her father’s shackles but was still her slave.

On the other hand, she had built a new life for herself. She had moved on. What would I do if I could do the same?

“We’ve crossed the border,” Sasha announced. “We’ll arrive at the airport in about ten minutes.”

“Good.” I pulled my phone out from my pocket and called Niccolo, who answered after two rings.

“You got her?” Disbelief tinged his voice. He had tried to talk me out of chasing her numerous times, but I simply couldn’t stop. It was the equivalent of not breathing, which would probably be less arduous for me than being without Amelia.

“Yes.”

“What now?” Niccolo asked.

My gaze followed the long strands of shiny hair down Amelia's arm. Her face was that of royalty. She would be the princess by my side. "You need to organize a wedding."

Niccola paused. "Wedding?"

"A wedding. I have waited long enough. I won't waste any more time. It will happen in two weeks and needs to be splendid. I want people to talk about it for years to come. Invite everyone who needs to attend."

It would be a show and Amelia's public submission. Everyone would see me marry a Lamorgese, and Amelia would be mine forever.

"You realize that the Camorra is still in a difficult situation? I don't think any of the Underbosses or Falcones will be able to make it on such short notice."

"I won't wait for anyone. In two weeks, Amelia will be my wife."

Huge blue eyes regarded me in shock as she struggled into an upright position. Holding her gaze, I hung up. The car pulled up next to the private jet. I motioned at it. "Our next ride. It'll take us home."

Amelia licked her lips, the gesture flipping my stomach in the most frustrating way. Amelia's power over me was too great. "You didn't even ask me to marry you."

I narrowed my eyes. "Would you say yes?"

She tucked a strand behind her ear, then looked away toward the jet, biding her time. My heart clenched in a way that reminded me of the day I'd read her letter. She could cause me pain without even putting a finger on me, and she was wholly unaware of her power. Or maybe she was simply good at playing innocent…

"Don't bother lying," I said with menace. "Your consent is irrelevant. Where we're going, only my word matters." I shoved the door open and got out, drawing in a deep breath of fuel-saturated air. Usually, when someone enraged me like Amelia, they died.

Amelia slipped out of her door before I could open it and rounded the car. She stopped in front of me. She wore jeans and a sweatshirt, a way-too-ordinary style for my future wife. She belonged in splendid dresses.

Her expression became pleading. "I have to tell Flavia that I'm leaving. She'll be worried sick if I just disappear, and she needs me to watch Luciano. I can't just disappear without a trace."

“You did with me,” I snarled. “Don’t remind me of Flavia’s role in your disappearance, or I might change my mind about sparing her.”

She swallowed hard. “You can’t force me to marry you. You’ll ruin everything we ever shared. We used to be friends. Isn’t that worth anything to you?”

Rage roared in my head. I grabbed her by the shoulders and pressed her against the side of the car. My men rushed toward the jet to give us space. They knew better than to be near me when I was in a mood.

I’d rarely bothered trying to tune down my rage and the need for bloodshed in the more than two years since I’d become Underboss. There was no need to. Now, however, with Amelia back in my life and her newfound talent to enrage me, it was a skill I needed to learn. “We aren’t friends anymore. Right now, we are nothing but captive and captor. Soon we will be lovers, husband and wife. Whatever was between us before, you ruined it by running.”

Her expression fell. Did she finally understand what she’d done? Or did she prefer to stay oblivious? “Don’t force me to marry you, Nestore. You’re better than that.”

I glared at the enraging girl before me. “Oh no, you will become my wife. I’ll parade you around as my trophy until the end of all days. You will be the memorial of your father’s fallen kingdom and the mark of my triumph, Amelia Lamorgese.”

She tried to shove me away, but I held her tighter. She was much smaller than I was, and I had worked on my strength every day since I’d left my cell.

I leaned down until her hot breath ghosted over my cheek. My lips brushed her throat, inhaling her sweet scent, slightly sweaty from a day of work, but still perfect, way too perfect. I bared my teeth and bit down into her soft skin, wanting to leave a mark. She gasped, her body tensing under my hands, her breath stuttering in her chest.

She tasted better than any fantasy of hers. I couldn’t wait to taste the rest of her, to draw out more pants of pain from her pink lips.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Amelia

I rubbed the spot where Nestore had bitten me, knowing the subtle soreness meant I'd have a bruise, which had definitely been his intention. I winced more from shock than pain—not that there wouldn't be more pain. There would be. Nestore would make me pay with pain and humiliation. I had run from him, and in Nestore's eyes, that made me almost as guilty as my father.

Nestore Romano hated my last name for everything my father had done to him and his family. But me… he hated me for the single act of running away. Every act of kindness and affection before my perceived crime was irrelevant.

I could see it in every menacing twist of his lips, in every harsh look, and in the fierceness of his touch.

I would become his wife.

I knew I wouldn't be able to talk him out of it. I wouldn't be able to run either. Nestore wouldn't let me succeed a second time. He had searched for me for more than two years. My stomach filled with strange warmth at the thought. I wanted to believe he'd done it because he loved me, but I feared

it was more out of hurt pride and fury. Could this kind of dedication, obsession even, be blamed on love?

Still, remembering his words about how I was in his heart and head, my own heart clenched with emotions. Even if I got the chance, could I really run again, knowing what it would do to Nestore? Last time, I hadn't allowed myself to consider Nestore's pain for more than a fleeting moment. I had been too wounded, too desperate to save myself to extend that kind of courtesy toward Nestore.

I slanted a cautious look over to Nestore. He sat several seats down from me on the private jet. I wasn't sure if he couldn't stand my presence or if he didn't trust himself around me. Considering the rage in his eyes, I was surprised he still controlled himself this well. He was looking out of the window at the night sky. The city lights spread out below. Soon we would land in Los Angeles. His expression was devoid of the rage and hatred it usually carried around me. He looked almost peaceful. With that look, he reminded me of the boy of his early capture—the boy who laughed and smiled, the boy with kindness in his heart. My father had carved it out of him. I wanted to believe a tiny part of it was still buried deeply within, and I'd be the one to draw it out of him. I was stronger than the girl from two years ago. But was I strong enough to beat Nestore's darkness?

I wasn't sure.

As if he could feel my gaze on him, he looked my way, and any trace of peacefulness vanished to be replaced by harshness. He held my gaze as if in silent challenge. He was a beautiful man, with the features of a Greek god. He was the man my heart longed for, and my body craved, but what he had in store for me wasn't what I had envisioned in my fantasies about our joined future.

Eventually, I dropped my gaze. I'd have to fight enough battles in the future. I had to choose them wisely.

When we pulled up to the gates of Romano Manor, my entire body switched to flight mode. I had often missed Nestore while I was gone, but never this place. It was a house of nightmares. Every memory, even the happy ones, was laced with misery and fear.

My hands began to tremble, and I clutched my knees to stop them. Nestore slanted me a curious look, his gaze sliding from my heaving chest down to my fingers clawing at my pants. His expression remained emotionless, cold even.

The steel gates, covered with rambling roses, glided open, giving way to the long driveway up to the hill where the manor sat. The brick walls surrounding the premises were also covered in rambling roses—thousands of flowers in bloom, a beautiful sight, but a reminder of another horror. The car pulled up the driveway. Off to the side, I could make out the rose maze in the distance. The gardens were pristine. Everything was kept immaculately. Rounded trellises created a tunnel of roses that followed a narrow path from the driveway toward the maze.

A fountain sat in the heart of the driveway with a human-sized figurine in the center. It hadn't been there when I'd left. When we came to a stop, my throat tightened until I had trouble breathing. This place held nothing but horrible memories. I wished Nestore had burned it down and built a new place for himself. For us.

This would be my home now, too.

Panic clawed at my insides at the mere idea of being a captive in these walls again. Nestore got out and rounded the car. He peered up at the mansion like a conqueror. As if living in this place was his daily battle, a battle he couldn't lose.

The driver opened my door, but I didn't get out right away. After a few deep breaths, I pushed forward and straightened. Nestore's gaze swept over to the fountain, and my eyes followed. I gasped. The white-marble figurine in the center of the fountain was an image of me; my hair was wind-swept, and a tunica-like dress clung to my curves. One of my hands was extended as if I was reaching out to something, or someone. Nestore strode past me and up the wide staircase that led up to the columned entrance. He stopped in the middle of the stairs and looked down at me. He wore a long black fur coat, which billowed in the gentle breeze like the black strands of his hair.

My breath faltered. The figurine seemed to be looking straight at him, her hands extended in a silent command or plea.

“I had it made from my memory because I didn’t have a single photo of you. It does you justice.”

The beautiful figure was ethereal, like a goddess. Was that how he saw me? Or used to see me?

His eyes cast to me. He held out his hand, palm upward, a mirror move to the one from the figurine.

“Come.”

The word was quiet, but it carried all the way down to where I waited in the car. My gaze traveled up the building looming before me like a menacing giant. This place had been featured in too many of my nightmares. Now it would haunt my waking moments, too.

My heart pounding in my chest, I set a foot closer to the steps, then another. I focused on Nestore’s outstretched hand and not the manor behind him. Despite Nestore’s threatening words, his presence soothed the fears of a younger Amelia.

When I put my hand in his, a shiver coursed down my spine. I followed his gaze. From this vantage point, we could look down at the city spreading out seemingly endlessly. “This is all mine, and now you are too.”

His fingers curled around my hand, and he pulled me into the elegant foyer. The scent of old wood, fur, and leather drifted into my nose. A massive chandelier made from bleached antlers hung over our heads, and a bearskin spread on the marble floor. The flower vases that had adorned the left sideboard were gone, replaced by a samurai sword and a baroque painting of a hunting scene. He tugged at my hand and led me up the winding staircase to the entrance hall, where a massive tapestry depicted another hunt: men on horses, menacing dogs, and fleeing boars.

Due to the hillside location, the foyer was situated at the level where the staff quarters, kitchen, and cloakroom were, while the even larger entrance hall marked the true beginning of the living quarters. My sneakers squeaked on the shiny marble floor. This place looked like I remembered it, except for a few details like the trophy boards decorating the high walls. At first glance, I thought they were animal bones, but upon closer look, I recognized a few human hand skeletons, several skulls, and even a few

thigh bones and pelvises. The chandelier was created from a human rib cage.

I felt dizzy looking at the many human bones around me, all bleached white. Mementos of Nestore's quest for revenge. This place was a graveyard, not a home. The air felt heavy, loaded with dark memories. I wanted out, but there was no escaping.

Nestore's lips pulled into a satisfied smirk. He gestured at the display of bones. "You knew many of these men. Our tormentors. Now forever exhibited as a warning for those who think they could disobey me."

I shook my head, suppressing a wave of nausea. "This is…" I wasn't even sure what to say, except for disgusting and crazy. "Madness."

Nestore scanned the trophies. "It's a necessary precaution."

"If police ever set foot inside, you'd be in trouble."

Nestore chuckled, expression alight with playful mirth. "Nobody sets foot into my home without my permission, Amelia. Do not concern yourself with such silly worries."

"What do you want me to worry about?"

He tugged me closer and cupped my cheek almost lovingly. "How to make up for your transgression."

"Can I?" I breathed.

Nestore was so used to his anger. Was he still capable of forgiveness?

"We'll see." He dropped his hand and opened the double doors to the ballroom. My belly tightened, remembering all the bloodshed this room had seen. The aroma of firewood carried over to me from the massive dark gray marble fireplace, where ambers glowed. I froze, my lips parting. At the end of the room, a platform had been set up. A massive dark throne and a slightly smaller white-gray throne sat on top of it. As we got closer, I could see that the smaller throne had been made from driftwood, while the bigger one had been made from almost black wood.

"After our wedding, this will be your throne," Nestore said as he gestured to the driftwood throne.

He sat on the black throne, leaned back, and spread his legs with a smirk. He enjoyed my obvious shock.

"You aren't a king," I said, because I worried that he'd forgotten. What if he had fully descended into madness? The idea was unbearable, but I'd rather come to terms with it now.

His smirk sharpened, and he stretched his arms out on the rests, flexing long fingers before gripping the rounded ends. “In these walls, in my city, in my territory, I am whatever I decide. If I call myself king, then I am king. My word is law. You’d be better off remembering it too.”

I wrapped my arms around my body.

He looked away with a hard twist of his mouth as if he couldn’t bear the sight of me. “But I am very aware of who I am, Amelia. I am the Underboss. I am the Camorrista. I am Nestore Romano. I am the man you betrayed.”

I nodded because I wasn’t sure what else to do. “Can I go to my room now? Or will you lock me in a cell?”

Nestore shoved to his feet, his eyes alight with torment. “You won’t ever be locked in a cell again. You are too precious to rot in a basement.”

“Instead, you’ll lock me in a gilded cage of your own making?” I asked with a sad smile.

His brows furrowed, then his expression smoothed. “Follow me,” he clipped, face hardening. He strode away, and I had trouble keeping up with his long strides. We followed another staircase up to the bedrooms.

Nestore opened the last door in the hallway. The primary bedroom. I stepped into the familiar room. It was the room where I’d slept before I’d run off. Black silk bedding covered the bed, and heavy black drapes hung from the four posters. “Is this where you sleep?”

Nestore followed me toward the bed. “Not since you left. We’ll share this room once we’re married.” He wrapped a strand of my hair around his index finger. “Only two more weeks before every part of you will be mine.”

I glared. “Not every part,” I whispered, overcome by anger. “My heart belongs to the boy I once knew, not the man in front of me.”

He dropped his finger. A look as if he’d been stabbed passed his face before the cruel mask took its place. “Then I’ll have to make the ownership of your body even more worthwhile.”

He turned abruptly, causing his fur coat to swish past my legs, before he stalked out and thrust the door shut.

What was I supposed to do now?

Was I allowed to walk around the house? Did I even want to? What other horrors would I find?

Was my father still locked in a cell in the basement?

Sometime in the early morning hours, I had fallen asleep but was woken by a soft knock. I untangled myself from the blankets, disoriented. I was still in yesterday's clothes and in desperate need of a shower. A young woman, maybe in her mid-twenties, waited in front of the door when I opened it. She was lanky and tall with ash-blond hair and an eye-catching gap between her front teeth. She was gorgeous, especially her full mouth, which caught my attention.

"I'm Francoise, your seamstress. Mr. Romano sent me to take your measurements so I can sew dresses for you."

My lips parted in surprise.

"May I come in?"

"Uhh, sure." I stepped back, still completely taken aback. I had been ripped from my life less than twenty-four hours ago and had trouble catching up. She pulled a suitcase behind her and set it down on the floor beside the bed. Inside was a heap of fabrics in different shades of white and cream. "You're creating my wedding dress?" I asked.

She shook her head with an apologetic smile. "No, not today. I need you to come to my shop. The fabrics for wedding gowns are too precious and heavy to carry with me. These fabrics are for dresses and nightgowns. Mr. Romano told me he wants to see you in light colors."

My eyebrows shot up. "Did he?"

I swallowed my anger. This woman had nothing to do with it. She was doing her job. "What if I want a different color or pants?"

She looked at me pleadingly as she gingerly picked up two pieces of clothing. "I'm just following orders. I already made a couple of pieces for you to wear right away."

"When did you make them?"

She flushed. "In the past few hours. Mr. Romano called me and asked me to create a few dresses for you to wear. Just three pieces. I'll work on the rest of your wardrobe in the following days."

She put the dresses down on the bed. As she had said, there were three pieces. One was a simple long-sleeved, floor-length white dress; another was a short dress with long sleeves; and the third was a midi dress with a flared skirt, sweetheart neckline, and short sleeves.

“Could you put them on so I can see if they fit?”

I took the clothes into the bathroom with me and put them down on the rim of the tub. I peeled out of my clothes, laying them down on the floor, like I had to put down the life I had built. What was Flavia doing? She must be worried sick by now. And what about Luciano? Nobody would watch him now. Despite my reluctance, I changed into the first dress, the floor-length one. Surprise washed over me. It fit nearly perfectly. I emerged from the bathroom, and the seamstress immediately set to work, rounding me and touching the fabric at my back where the dress was slightly too big. “Once I have more clothes for you to wear, I’ll take this in, so it fits perfectly.”

“How did you know my measurements?” I asked.

“Mr. Romano guessed them, and he did a very good job.”

I sank my teeth into my lower lip. “How long have you been working for him?”

“For a year. I do all of his clothes.”

I regarded her as she tugged at the hem of my dress, which ended about an inch below my ankle, brushing the floor. I couldn’t help but wonder if she was more than his seamstress. Nestore’s words about how he’d slept with other women cut through me like a sharp knife. Maybe my jealousy was hypocritical, considering I had left him. I couldn’t expect him not to move on. Yet I hadn’t. Nestore had always been with me, even when I’d been thousands of miles away. I had kept my firsts. I wished he had too. I shoved those thoughts aside and focused on Francoise.

All three dresses fit me well enough to wear in the following days. The material was a soft cotton-silk mix that flattered my body. I didn’t usually wear white, but apart from that, the pieces would have been to my liking if Nestore hadn’t forced them on me.

Francoise took my measurements after that. “Please pick the fabrics you prefer, then I’ll be done for today.”

I picked a handful of white- and cream-colored fabrics, then Francoise handed me a small bag with new underwear and tights before she left.

I took a quick shower before putting on the long dress and tights, since it was quite cold for an early spring day in Los Angeles.

I braided my long hair and let it trail down across my left shoulder, so the tips brushed my breast, then I moved toward the door. I was hungry. It was in the early afternoon, as I had slept through the morning. Stepping out into the hallway, I felt overcome with uncertainty. I knew this place and where the kitchen was, but my surroundings felt hostile in a way I couldn't put into words. The dark floral wallpaper seemed to swallow the light filtering through the half-closed drapes at the end of the corridor.

A shadow moved at the end of the hallway, spiking my pulse in fear. Nestore's tall form appeared, as if he'd materialized from the shadows. Had he been watching my room?

He wore black pants, a shiny black belt, and a black fur coat, but no shoes or shirt. My breath stuttered in my chest as he moved closer. His body was ripped, with a six-pack that made my mouth water embarrassingly, but my eyes began to linger on the many scars and worst of all, the brand in the shape of an L over his sternum that my father had burned into Nestore as a sign of his ownership.

Nestore stopped in front of me, his eyes taking me in from head to toe. "The dress fits you perfectly."

"Why white?"

He brushed his fingertips across my cheek like a ghost touch. "Because you spent too much time in darkness, and because being bound to me, part of your life will always be shrouded in shadows."

I sighed. I wanted to argue with him that it didn't have to be like that. He, too, could step out of the shadows, but I knew he didn't want to hear it, and worse, I wasn't entirely sure if it was true. "Why didn't you have my father's brand removed?"

Nestore's eyes flared with pain, then he peered down at the L on his chest. "Because, Amelia, it no longer stands for your father's ownership of me. You put your brand on my heart, so that's why the L shall remain."

I swallowed my rising emotions. When he said things like that, I wanted to believe his plans for me were only kind, but the flickers of menace in his eyes told me a war was raging in his body. I reached for the burn scar, but Nestore caught my wrist before my fingertips could touch his skin. "If we marry, I won't be a Lamorgese for much longer."

His smirk came quickly. “When, not if. And by blood, you’ll always be a Lamorgese even when my last name is yours.”

“Did you kill him?” I asked quietly. In the past two years, I had sometimes wondered about my father’s fate—not out of love or pity but simply because I wanted that chapter of my life to be over for good.

He stepped back, and his jaw clenched, eyes turning cold. He motioned for me to go ahead. “You must be hungry. Tonight, we’ll have entertainment, so I want you well-fed and fit.”

“What kind of entertainment?” I whispered. Something about his eager undertone set my teeth on edge.

“Wait and see.”

Nestore picked me up at six sharp from my room. I had prepared myself for the moment I’d open the door to Nestore’s harsh face, but I couldn’t prepare myself for what I saw on his head. A crown made from human fingers topped his head.

My fingers around the door handle tightened as I fought for composure. Nestore’s keen gaze locked on my face, waiting for a reaction that I had no intention of giving him. I wouldn’t become part of his game.

He scanned me from head to toe. “I knew you’d be gorgeous in white.”

I wore the long dress because the evenings were cold, and it turned out to be a good choice when Nestore led me out into the gardens. The sweet, floral scent of millions of blooming roses carried over to me as we strolled along the paved path, even before we reached the trellises or the maze. Nestore held my hand in a tight grip as he pulled me along. He refused to tell me what kind of spectacle awaited us. My skin crawled when I considered the options.

We walked past the maze to the farthest part of the premises, where the sports center used to be.

Nestore had removed the tennis courts and built a wide circular building in their place. It was only one story tall and windowless. Inside, electric

torches illuminated the rotunda. Two staircases led to the stories below. Noise came from this area, an erratic and excited roar of male voices. What was going on?

Nestore took my hand and led me down the staircase. I kept staring at the crown made from bones on his head. Part of me hoped it wasn't real bone, or at least not human bone. I wasn't an expert, so maybe it was something else. It reminded me of an array of entwined sprigs, and I decided to think of it as exactly that: sprigs. I needed to forget the truth.

When we emerged from the stairwell, my lips dropped open in surprise. The room resembled a miniature amphitheater. The ranks were crowded with men who fell silent when Nestore and I stepped out. Every eye followed us as Nestore pulled me toward a loge with a perfect view of the circular pit below.

The moment Nestore sat down, a man stepped into the pit. He was thick around the middle with broad shoulders and a thinning hairline. His heavy-lidded eyes carried the look of someone who had seen too much. "Tonight, we have a special treat. A rat gets its chance to evade death by surviving five minutes in a cage with Drago. Put your bets in. The fight begins in one minute."

The man disappeared through a door that led to another area below the ranks. I sent Nestore an incredulous look. "Drago, as in my father's tiger?"

My father had been obsessed with wild animals. His private zoo of apes, tigers, lions, and cheetahs had always made me feel icky. The poor beasts didn't have enough room, and my father kept them drugged half the time, so he could pet them and feel like an even bigger man for controlling them. He had brought them to this place when we'd moved here after Romano Senior had been murdered.

Nestore inclined his head, a few strands of his hair falling into his eyes as he held my gaze.

"You kept them?"

Nestore gripped the banister and surveyed the pit below before he fixed me with a look. "Not all of them. I could have had them killed. No sanctuary or zoo had room for them. There are too many wild animals being traded, and too many of them need to be rehomed."

"So now you use them for fights?"

His dark brows dipped. “It’s good entertainment, an effective deterrence, and drives up the bets. This is business, Amelia, one I need to keep running so I can buy you only the finest fabrics and gems.”

I shook my head, horrified by what Nestore had become.

A tall man with his long brown hair in a low ponytail entered the pit below. He wore only pants. His upper body bore a few bruises and cuts, but he seemed well otherwise. His gaze found Nestore, and his expression shifted into one of pleading. “Let me redeem myself. I could work for you.”

Nestore made a cutting motion with his hand and sank into the elevated red velvet chair behind him. I lowered myself into the seat beside him, my eyes trained on the circular arena. A door was pulled up behind the man in the pit. The man whirled around and backed away. For several seconds, nothing happened, then the head of a tiger peeked out of the inside before the rest of the majestic predator emerged from the shadows. The crowd aah’d, and money was handed to two men who took down bets on their phones. I wondered what they were betting on. Did anyone actually bet against the tiger?

My eyes caught on a clock on the wall that was counting the seconds of how long the man had spent in the pit with the tiger. That must be what everyone bet on.

Nestore raised an eyebrow, a challenging smirk tugging at his lips. “Wish to bet on the outcome?”

I gave a jerky shake of the head. “That’s not my definition of fun.”

He shrugged as if it were of no consequence to him. “It is mine, and it’ll be yours too.”

“Why? Will you turn me into a version of yourself?”

“Maybe you are already more like me than you want to admit.”

My attention was drawn to the cage. “I’m not.”

The tiger snarled and pounced. With one swipe of its massive paw, it sent the man flying. He landed on the floor with a terrified gasp and tried to scuttle backward to escape the prowling beast. It sank its teeth into the man’s shoulder, causing him to screech in pain.

“These caged predators never learned to go in for the kill. They play to satisfy their suppressed urge to hunt,” Nestore murmured, his expression pleased as he watched the spectacle.

I shuddered at the sounds of bones breaking and the screams of agony. They reminded me of the past, of Nestore's very own screams.

"These are men who betrayed me and the Camorra. Men like your father. Men who tortured and killed until I caught them."

I looked away, unable to bear another second of the barbaric display. Finally, the screams stopped, and only the sound of bones crunching and the wet noises of smacking could be heard.

"Why are you forcing me to watch this?" I asked in a whisper. Nestore leaned back in his chair. "To scare me? That's unnecessary. One look in your eyes is enough for that."

He let out a low chuckle. "You watched me getting tortured for years, you heard my screams and the sound of my bones breaking, and you never ran away from it, but this makes you want to take flight?" The hint of accusation carried in his voice, as if he thought I had enjoyed watching him suffer. His mind had warped the truth, and my running away had definitely contributed to it.

"I stayed to remind you that you weren't alone. I bore the sound of your screams because I knew you suffered so much worse. I didn't do it out of curiosity or fun. I stayed because I cared about you. After all, it was the only way to support you."

Some of the hardness disappeared from Nestore's eyes, and hope flared in me, only to be snuffed out when his jaw set tight and he turned away. He watched the tiger eat parts of the corpse before the predator lost interest, and so did Nestore. The door opened, and the cat prowled out.

A cleaning crew dressed in white bodysuits entered the pit and cleaned up the blood and remains with a water hose and a broom. The sharp hiss of the water hose raised goose bumps on my skin, and I shuddered as memories from long ago emerged, making my belly roil.

Nestore leaned forward and touched my forearm. I met his gaze, surprised by the understanding in his eyes. Maybe not everything was lost.

"You are safe."

"Am I?"

He removed his hand, a cold mask sliding over his face. Once the cleaning crew left, two men stepped out to fight each other. If any of the spectators were disturbed by the display in front of them, they hid it

extraordinarily well. Or maybe this was just daily business, and they had grown used to it.

Nestore motioned to a server I hadn't noticed before. Most people had to go to the bar on the highest rank if they wanted something to drink but not Nestore of course.

"Red wine for me," he said before he settled back in his armchair with a bored air. "What do you want, Amelia?"

I wasn't sure I'd be able to keep anything down, but I didn't want to give Nestore the satisfaction of seeing me squirm. "A glass for me as well."

Surprise crossed Nestore's face. "You have developed a taste for red wine?"

I shrugged and leaned as far back in my seat as I could so I didn't see the lower part of the pit. "I'll develop it now," I said petulantly. Maybe alcohol would make this display of violence more bearable. "It might help me blank out how cruel you've become. How arrogant and merciless and drunk on power."

His smile hardened. "Ahhh, I see." The server returned with two glasses of dark red wine. I wished it wouldn't remind me quite so much of blood.

I took the glass. Nestore raised his own with a smirk. "To the woman who broke my heart, my future wife."

He waited expectantly for me to clink my glass against his. With a hard swallow, I complied. At the high clanking sound, the little hairs on my neck rose. Below us in the pit, the grunts and pained gasps of the fighters increased in volume.

I took a sip of the wine; it was tart and strong, with a faint berry note, and the heat traveled down my throat, then up into my head. "Will you ever forgive me for running?"

Nestore took a swallow, his expression pensive. "I would have forgiven you almost anything, Amelia. But this…" His eyes bored into mine. "You betrayed me."

"I never did anything against you. I never even thought about another man."

"You didn't cheat. But you didn't stay."

I looked away from the deep hurt and accusation in his gaze. I sipped at the wine, feeling a soft buzz that felt almost comforting. "And now you want to make me pay. You want to get even."

“I can’t, Amelia. Nothing I could do would cause you the same agony I felt when I realized you had abandoned me.”

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Nestore made sure at least two guards were always posted outside my door and accompanied me wherever I went in the house. I wasn't allowed outside yet, not even into the garden without Nestore.

Nestore was gone all the time. I wasn't sure why he avoided me. Maybe he worried he'd leave bruises that would ruin my wedding outfit if he were around me. I spent my days in the library, feeling alone and lost. The only time I was allowed to leave the premises was a few days after my arrival, when I visited Francoise in her tailor shop. My two guards led me to a car where Niccolo, Nestore's cousin, was waiting. Surprise washed over me at the sight of him leaning against the driver's door. I hadn't dared to ask Nestore about him, but I wouldn't have been surprised if he had killed his cousin in a fit of rage after I ran away.

His expression remained cool, almost hostile, as I approached him. He wore black pants, a black dress shirt, and a long black coat. The only thing missing was a hat.

"You're alive."

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he asked with a hint of apprehension. He stepped away from the driver’s door so one of my guards could get behind the steering wheel.

“Given Nestore’s obsession with death and human bones, I don’t think anyone’s safe from becoming a trophy.”

I didn’t miss the flash of worry on the younger guard’s face.

“You are,” Niccolo said, with a bitter twist of his mouth.

“He’s forcing me to marry him.”

“It could be worse. Count yourself lucky Nestore hasn’t chosen another fate for you.”

I shook my head at his callousness. “And you are his henchman?”

“I am his consigliere and closest ally. And I’ll make sure you don’t get a chance to break what’s left of his heart again. Now would you be so kind as to get inside the car, Amelia?” The last part was said with fake pleasantry.

I slid into the back seat, followed by Niccolo. “Take us to Francoise,” he instructed.

Niccolo kept his eyes trained out his window. He obviously didn’t have any interest in a chat with me. It wasn’t that I sought a friend in him, but I was lonely, and he was the only source of information I had.

I breathed a little easier when we left the gates behind. In broad daylight and with the cool spring sun casting its benevolent light on everything, I felt a flutter of happiness about being back in the city where I’d grown up. Romano Manor presented a stark contrast to the modern, colorful city scenery. It was almost as if I had stepped out of an alternate reality.

“Don’t think about running. I’ll shoot you in the leg if you do.”

“Won’t Nestore be angry if you harm me?”

“He’ll be out of his mind, but if I let you run, nothing will save me.”

I pursed my lips. Was this his way of guilting me into staying? I didn’t owe him anything.

The shop was in downtown LA. A simple window read Francoise Custom Tailor, and behind the glass, I could see Francoise sitting at a table with a sewing machine. My younger guard stepped in first, followed by me and then Niccolo, while guard number two stayed in front of the door.

Francoise looked up from her sewing machine and immediately got up. Her smile was quick when she met my gaze, but vanished when she looked at Niccolo. She gave him a curt nod before she rounded her table and came toward me. “Please follow me to the back so I can measure you in detail.”

She led me into a back room full of shelves that were stacked with hundreds of fabrics. “I must ask you to undress to your underwear so I can take your measurements.”

“You already did.”

“I need more reference points for your dress. Given the short timeframe, it needs to fit perfectly as I won’t have enough time for corrections.”

Niccolo strode past me and searched the room. “Is there a second exit?”

“Behind the rag,” Francoise said. Niccolo positioned himself there with his back turned to me.

When I was sure he wouldn’t risk a peek, I began to undress. My cheeks heated when Francoise stepped up to me. I wasn’t used to being around people in my underwear.

She took a measuring tape from her apron and put it around my throat. My eyes grew wide with shock. “What is this for?”

Did Nestore want to put a collar on me? I wasn’t sure of anything anymore.

As if she could read my thoughts, horror filled Francoise’s face. “I don’t do leatherwork. This is for your dress’s collar.”

“A collar?”

“Mr. Romano picked the design of your dress. His instructions are clear.”

“So I don’t get a say?”

“You can pick the lace trimming.”

I let out a huff.

“Please hold still so my measurements are correct,” she said quietly, then wrapped the measuring tape around my throat again. Next, she measured my shoulders, upper arms, wrists, chest, waist, and hips. She gave a satisfied nod when she was done.

“How much longer will this take?” Niccolo inquired.

“This is a demanding dress. I need to be thorough,” Francoise said sternly. She motioned for me to follow her toward a stack with lace. One with roses and tendrils caught my eye. I pointed at it. Francoise pulled it out and laid it on a table. She took out small lace roses and pearls from a drawer beneath it and placed them on the fabric. “I’ll attach pearls, gemstones, and these lace roses on the lace and the rest of your dress.”

“And you’re sure you can do this within seven days?”

“I won’t disappoint Mr. Romano,” Francoise said with a slight waver in her voice.

That evening, Nestore joined me for dinner for the first time since I’d arrived.

His expression reflected curiosity when I sank across from him. The dining room table easily accommodated twenty people, but only two places at opposite ends had been set.

I raised my eyebrow. “Are you scared of getting close to me?”

“Your closeness unsettles me for various reasons,” he drawled as he lifted a glass with red wine.

I did the same and let the alcohol boost my courage. “Why?”

A predatory look crossed his face. “Because I’m not a man who has to restrain himself, but you aren’t my wife yet, so restraint is required.”

“Marriage doesn’t mean you shouldn’t still restrain yourself,” I said softly. Nestore was shirtless as usual, the thick fur coat draped over the back of his chair. His upper body oozed strength, and I could imagine running my fingers along his pecs and biceps, then lower. I had only lived out my desires in my fantasies and wished I could explore them in reality, but I couldn’t help but feel anxious over Nestore’s plans. He scared me.

Nestore motioned at one of the maids who rang a small bell. Soon after, another maid entered the room with a tray. A roasted duck perched in its center, surrounded by roasted carrots and brussels sprouts. She put it down

in front of Nestore. He picked up a long, gleaming knife from the serving platter and began carving the bird. At least he wasn't using the knife he made from my father's bone, though I was sure he still had it.

I shivered. If Nestore intended to unsettle me, he was succeeding.

When he was done, he got up and carried the serving platter over to me. The maids left the room. "What piece would you like?"

He had cut the duck into two breasts and two legs.

I pointed at the breast. He lifted it onto my plate, then cut it into thin slices so I could see it was medium rare inside. Meat juice gathered at my place. Nestore put the vegetables down beside the breast before returning to his side of the table and serving himself.

I stared down at the duck breast, my belly clenching. I loved duck, and I always took my steak medium rare, so I could only blame my squeamishness on the situation.

"Enjoy your food," Nestore said, almost in challenge.

I speared a piece of meat with my fork and pushed it into my mouth before I forced a petulant smile. Nestore took a bite, but never took his eyes off me. "I have been dreaming about your taste."

My expression fell, my mind tumbling over images of cannibalism.

Nestore chuckled and leaned back, giving me an enticing view of his six-pack and the trail of dark hair disappearing inside his black pants. "I'm not that depraved. I'm talking about tasting your pussy."

My heart pounded even faster, and warmth settled in my cheeks, then seemed to drop into my core. "What about Flavia and Luciano? Will they be allowed to attend our wedding?"

The switch of topic was necessary to keep my sanity.

"No. They aren't welcome in my territory."

"But they are safe?" I whispered.

"I have no interest in punishing Flavia."

Relief eased the weight off my chest. "Only me?"

"Only you. I'm still not sure what punishment you deserve."

On the morning of our wedding day, the seamstress came over again. Today was the first time I would see my wedding dress. I was nervous. What if Nestore had picked something morbid for it? Even though this wedding wasn't my choice, I wanted a dress I felt comfortable in.

Francoise entered my bedroom with two men holding a giant white clothing bag. They had trouble carrying it into my room because it was so voluminous.

Once they had left and closed the door, Francoise unzipped the bag. I stepped closer, my breath catching in my throat as she lifted the dress on a hanger with obvious strain. The dress was magnificent, more beautiful than anything I'd ever imagined, even in my most daring fantasies. It looked as if the fabric of the bodice had been woven of white gold yarn and adorned with minuscule diamonds, lace roses, and pearls. Due to the many pearls attached to the fabric, it was rather stiff, almost like armor. The collar and sleeves were made of silk and adorned with gemstones and pearls. The inside of the dress was as smooth as water as it glided over my fingertips.

"Did you sew it alone?"

This looked like a project that took months, not a week.

"Yes. Mr. Romano handed me a drawing of the dress he wanted, and I sewed it based on it."

My eyes grew wide with surprise.

"Let's put this on so I can see if I need to make any last-minute adjustments."

She helped me undress to my underwear, then pulled out lace panties from the clothing bag. They were sheer in the back and in the front, except for a lace rose covering my most private area. I flushed as I picked them up. These little nothings wouldn't cover much. "What about a bra?"

"The dress doesn't allow for one."

She gave me an understanding smile, then turned her back to me and hung the dress by the hanger on the doorframe. I quickly removed my underwear and put on the panties, then covered my breasts with my hands. "You can turn around."

She turned with a kind smile, then moved to my side with the petticoat. "There's a nightgown and lingerie in the clothing bag for tonight."

Tonight. The color drained from my face. Our wedding night.

I had fantasized about sweet lovemaking with Nestore in the past. Even after I'd run away, he'd often appeared in my dreams. It had always been sweet and loving. What Nestore had in mind was far from my fantasy. He wanted to claim me and to prove a point.

The seamstress's face filled with pity, but she didn't say anything. I was glad she didn't try to assure me things would be okay. She knew Nestore, or at least the stories everyone told about him, so there was nothing she could have said to improve my situation.

In the past, I never had reason to fear him, but now that he hated me, nothing could protect me from his wrath anymore. Maybe I could have softened his anger if he'd given me the time to convince him, but he'd avoided me, maybe for that reason. Perhaps he wanted to hold on to his rage to punish me.

After I'd put on the petticoat, the seamstress helped me into the dress. It was heavy and molded my body into a perfect hourglass shape. I never wore turtlenecks, so the high collar felt unfamiliar. At least it wasn't as tight as the rest of the dress.

"Perfect," she said with a satisfied nod.

She was right. The dress fit perfectly, and it looked like something straight out of a fairy tale. When I moved the skirt, the diamonds glittered in the light, sending prisms on the walls. The bodice accentuated my breasts but remained modest due to the high collar. I remembered talking about my dream wedding with Nestore when we'd been locked in the basement. I'd described a princess-like dress to him, and this came very close to the vision I'd described back then, minus the collar. I couldn't help but wonder if this symbolized him chaining me to him.

Heat pressed against my eyeballs, making me blink rapidly in an attempt to contain the tears.

I wished today were like the fairy tale I had imagined. I wished Nestore's and my story hadn't taken a dark turn.

"I don't need to change anything." She glanced at her watch. "I'll make room for the stylists now."

She took my hands and gave me a small smile. "I wish you all the happiness in the world."

I couldn't return the smile. "Thank you."

She left. I stared at myself in the floor-to-ceiling mirror. The stylist entered shortly after. She enhanced my natural curls and then put a diadem on my head. She kept my makeup light, as I preferred, and when I finally looked in the mirror, I truly looked like a princess. My fingers trembled as I smoothed them down the skirt of my dress.

“Your shoes,” the stylist reminded me, setting the heels down in front of me. They, too, were adorned with countless crystal gemstones. I slipped them on, wondering how this wedding would play out. I had seen cars arrive in the past hour. Many unfamiliar faces had emerged, dressed in their finest clothes.

The only family I had left, Flavia and my half brother, weren’t invited. Nestore couldn’t forgive her for helping me run. Maybe it was better if she stayed away so she’d be safe from his wrath. She had escaped this place.

“What now?” I asked, as I waited in my dress. The stylist folded her hands in front of her stomach and gave me a stiff smile. “I was told to keep you company until someone picks you up.”

Who would lead me to the altar? I doubted my father was in a state to do so, if he was even still alive.

A knock sounded, and she quickly moved to the door and opened it. Surprise filled me at the sight of Nestore’s cousin, Niccolo, waiting in the doorway. He was dressed in a black tuxedo with a bloodred bow tie and shiny black shoes. His curly chestnut-brown hair was combed back. He gave me a tight smile when he stepped in. That was when I noticed the cascading wedding bouquet in his right hand. He held it out to me. I bridged the distance between us and took it from him. It was a massive bouquet, beautiful but at the same time with an air of… wistfulness. Roses and chrysanthemums in mauve, deep purple, and blush mixed with dark green leaves, creating a Gothic look. I fingered the blush-colored roses. “Are they from the maze?”

Niccolo’s stern expression shifted to something slightly softer. “They are. Nestore insisted they be in the bouquet.”

I wondered why. I got the feeling the maze only symbolized pain for him: the loss of his mother, the trauma of the day she never returned, the knowledge that she was buried somewhere inside the maze.

“Come now. The ceremony is about to begin,” Niccolo said, holding out his arm for me to take.

“You’ll lead me to the altar?” I asked. Considering his open contempt for me, I hadn’t expected it.

“I’m the only family Nestore has left, and your family members are either dead or traitors, so yes, I’ll walk you to the altar.”

I swallowed hard. I slid my arm into his, then gripped the heavy bouquet more firmly.

Niccolo led me into the hallway, then down the staircase to the magnificent entrance hall. Dark red rose petals covered the floor like a carpet and led toward the closed doors of the ballroom, behind which I could hear a low hum of voices.

“I hope you don’t intend to run ever again. You almost killed him. If you run again, I’ll kill you. He’ll mourn you, but he’ll move on. It’s better than to repeat his misery of the last two years.” The anger in Niccolo’s eyes hit me unprepared, but at the same time, I felt relief. Nestore needed people who cared about him. He needed a family he could trust.

“He won’t let me,” I said with a slight shrug. Nestore would keep a close eye on me.

“You should want to stay.”

“Will he give me reason to stay?” I whispered. “Because to me it looks like he wants to make me pay.”

Niccolo sneered. “Nestore isn’t the same with you as he is with the rest of the world. He’s feared. He’s cruel. But he holds you on a pedestal.”

I doubted it. Maybe in the past, but as he had said, he couldn’t forgive me for running.

Violin music picked up, followed by the lower notes of a contrabass. Like the bouquet, the sound was a mix of soft beauty and deep, mournful tones. The doors swung inward. Hundreds of guests lined the dark red carpet made of rose petals that ended at the front of the ballroom, where an arch was draped in black fabric and dark red roses. Below it stood Nestore.

Pity filled everyone’s eyes.

This wasn’t what fairy tales were made of.

“The madman and his broken princess” was what people called us behind closed doors. I had overheard the kitchen staff gossiping. Broken princess. I didn’t feel broken, so I could only assume they expected Nestore to break me.

Nestore wore his long black fur coat, with the white crown atop his black hair. He wasn't wearing a shirt beneath his coat, but he carried his scars like the most expensive garment. I'd witnessed the birth of almost every scar on his body, had borne witness to the screams that came with them, had often cried along with Nestore as he bore the agony, until after a while only my tears fell. The part of Nestore capable of tears died long ago.

Niccolo tugged at my arm until I followed him down the rose path. Some faces were distantly familiar as I passed them. The compassion on the women's faces tightened my belly. In the front row, Remo Falcone, his three brothers, and his enforcer, Fabiano, waited. I looked away from them. I couldn't help but blame Remo for Nestore's further descent into darkness.

When we arrived at the front, my gaze moved up to Nestore's face. His expression held triumph and a dark hunger that made me want to take flight again. The music slowed, then stopped, and Nino Falcone stepped to the front, holding a book in his hands. Was he going to hold the ceremony?

Nestore held out his hand for me. His palm bore burn scars. But movement in a small cage off to the right caught my attention. Had Nestore put one of the wild animals into a cage for entertainment?

My heart shriveled when I realized the creature in the cage was my father, or what was left of him after years in Nestore's vengeful hands. I didn't love my father. Most days, I feared and despised him and wanted him dead. He deserved what Nestore had done to him, and my heart didn't break for him at the sight of his suffering. It broke for the man who'd soon become my husband. With every act of cruelty, a little part of Nestore died. Or maybe I was foolish for believing there was still anything left of my Nestore.

"Amelia."

His low command forced me to shake off my shock and put my hand in his. My eyes moved up to the crown on top of his black hair. This was different from the other crown he'd worn. Gemstones had been glued to the top of the fingers where the nails should have been.

Lowering my gaze from the disturbing sight, I put the bouquet on the black chair beside me, then we faced Nino.

The ceremony was short yet not sweet. It spoke of triumph and overcoming the things that held us back. It talked about devotion and loyalty. I glanced at Nestore's face, hoping to see glimmers of love, but his

expression was as cold as marble. Niccolo came with a plush red velvet cushion with our rings. It was the first time I saw them. As with everything else, Nestore had made the decisions.

He took a beautiful yellow gold marquise-cut ruby ring and put it on my finger. Small diamonds sat beside the massive ruby gemstone. His own ring was black with a fine line of tiny red rubies in the center like a rivulet of blood. My fingers shook when I put it on him. For a heartbeat, he closed his eyes, and an almost peaceful look passed his face, but then it vanished, and he fixed me with a possessive stare.

“You may kiss the bride.”

Every pair of eyes in the room was on us. I didn’t dare look into the cage to see if my father was watching, too. I focused on Nestore. This was his show. His act of dominance. My leaving had broken his heart. Now he wanted to break mine, and if that failed, break me.

He cupped my cheek with his rough palm, then lowered his head slowly. I tilted my head up to make it easier for him. I had yearned for this kiss for so long, but never like this.

His lips were almost shy as they sought mine, tender and probing, bare of the harder emotions his face displayed. I kissed him back with the same softness, hoping it would awaken something in him I feared was dead.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I had planned this wedding in the weeks, months, and years I'd almost despaired because Amelia was gone. The knowledge that I would find her one day had kept me going when revenge alone wasn't enough to carry me through the darker days. Seeing her walk toward me in the dress I had sewn for her based on the memory of her dream wedding dress, I could barely breathe. She was magnificent, more beautiful than anything I had ever seen. She was worth every ounce of blood I'd shed to find her, and worth every person I'd tortured to get information. I'd kill a thousand for an hour with her, and give my life before I'd allow anyone to take her from me again.

When my ring gleamed on her slender finger, a rawness filled my chest I couldn't place, a need I wanted to sate, but wasn't sure could be sated by claiming her. What I wanted from Amelia was more than the mere claiming of her promise, of her firsts. I wanted something I couldn't rip from her, no matter how powerful I became.

Tonight, I'd have to make do with what I could take. Amelia was mine. Eternally.

In my darkest moments after her escape, fueled by utter rage and a sense of betrayal more potent than after my father's death, I had imagined how I'd make her pay, maybe even make her beg for mercy. Yet the moment I'd laid eyes on her again, the moment those blue eyes had looked at me, I knew I wanted more than her destruction.

My heartbeat tripled as I kissed her. She was soft, sweet. She filled me with a lightness I could hardly bear and craved nonetheless. Her lips molded to mine, the touch a caress that I could feel down to my toes.

I pulled away and forced my face into a hard mask. Amelia peered up at me with confusion and hope.

I turned toward the guests. "Enjoy the festivities. Food and drinks will be served in the gardens. We accept your congratulations and take our leave now."

Amelia gave me a stunned look. I had no intention to celebrate with these people, not even with Niccolo. I wanted to be with Amelia. I had longed for this moment for years. False pleasantries with people I didn't care about wouldn't keep me from making Amelia mine. "There will be plenty of pit fights for your entertainment tonight."

Tugging Amelia along, I stepped up toward the cage that held Lamorgese. He was pressed into a corner, staring down at his feet.

"Tonight, I'll claim a Lamorgese. I'll lick every crevice of her beautiful body until she worships my tongue like a deity, Achille." Amelia stiffened by my side, but I kept my attention on her father. Revulsion filled his face, but he didn't dare meet my gaze. He cowered at my feet like the dirty rat he was.

I turned my back on the cage and peered down at Amelia, who watched me with a horrified expression.

My fingers tightened around her smaller hand and tugged her down the rose pathway, past clapping guests. Amelia followed because I didn't give her a choice, but I could feel the waves of confusion and trepidation rolling off her. We walked through the hallways of my home in silence. The only sound was the fast pounding of my pulse and the *click-clack* of Amelia's heels on the marble flooring.

When we stepped into the bedroom of our primary suite, and I closed the door behind us, I found myself at a moment of uncertainty. Part of me

craved to cause Amelia pain for what she'd put me through. The other part wanted to appreciate her in the way I'd envisioned before she'd run.

Amelia turned to me, her eyes full of fear. Fear of what I'd do to her.

It made me feel powerful even though I knew Amelia held far more control over me. I gripped her neck and tilted her head back so her mouth was in the perfect position for me to ravage. When my tongue plunged past her lips, tasting her sweetness, my body sprang to life. Amelia had always made me feel alive, but today, she also made me burn with a passion I had never encountered. I pressed into her as my fingers on her neck kept her in place, then deepened the kiss, wanting to consume her, to show her how much I craved her.

Amelia leaned into the kiss. She didn't fight me, didn't push me away as I'd expected. I ripped my lips away from her. I wanted to stay in control of her, of myself. I pulled my sickle-shaped knife and hooked it in the collar of her dress, then jerked it down. Amelia cried out in shock. Pearls and gems spilled onto the floor. The blade slid all the way to the hem of the skirt, and I followed its brutal descent until I knelt on the floor and the blade slammed against the wooden floor, getting stuck. I released the knife and left it sticking in the floor. The dress slipped off Amelia's body, leaving her in see-through panties. My gaze drank her in. Her lean legs, the beautiful valley between her thighs, the dark triangle beneath the rose laced into the sheer fabric of her panties, her soft belly, narrow hips, and those perfect, round breasts.

I wore a crown like a king, ruled over my men like a king, and I decided over life and death like a king, but kneeling at Amelia's feet, I felt like a peasant about to worship. How could anyone be this beautiful?

Amelia flushed, embarrassment staining her cheeks rosy. The rosy hue spread down her throat and breasts. Those pink nipples teased me.

"I want to punish you," I said in a raw voice, then shoved up to my feet and snatched up one of those small nipples between my lips. I sucked the soft peak into my mouth, then lavished the hardening pebble with my tongue before I murmured, "I want to worship you, too. What am I supposed to do with you?"

She touched my neck, her fingers gently gliding into my hair, making me want to purr. God, her touch was like a balm. I sucked her nipple

sharply, wanting to be the one who determined the course of this night. “Worship me,” she whispered.

I chuckled darkly against her nipple and nipped at it, making her gasp before I soothed it with my tongue. “I’m not sure you are deserving of worship.”

I wanted to lose myself in her, wanted to lose control. I wanted to claim her every first, wanted to take pleasure and serve revenge. I wanted her tears, her begging, her fear. I wanted to destroy her because she nearly destroyed me, but as I peered up into her face, I realized she still held the power for devastation in her hands.

Nestore’s breath was hot against my chest. His teeth grazed my sensitive nipple in a warning, a promise? Even my body wasn’t sure, torn between arousal and panic. “Why did you pick roses from the maze for my bouquet?”

His gaze lowered to the flowers I’d dropped on the floor. “Because they are beautiful and fragile-looking but can pierce you with their thorns like you, and to honor the memory of my mother.”

“Oh,” I whispered, touched by his thoughtfulness. If he tried to honor his mother like this, my Nestore must still be in him. “That’s very sweet of you.”

Straightening to his full height, he scoffed and took my chin between his thumb and forefinger. “Amelia, don’t be foolish enough to think of me as

sweet. You'll start to hope when there's none."

I gritted my teeth. Cruelty followed every glimpse of kindness. It was as if two hearts beat in his chest. He bowed his head, and his teeth grazed my nipple again, sending a surprising spike of lust through me. At the same time, I worried if this was only a taste of the pain Nestore had planned for me. His lips cupped my breast and sucked. Every tug sent shivers through my body. Heat gathered between my thighs. Soon, I was panting softly, my fingers in his hair tense with need. He released my nipple and sank to his knees. It was an astonishing sight. Nestore, dressed in fur and bone, was kneeling at my feet and looking up at me in a mix of admiration and rage.

"I'll make you scream tonight," he promised with a smile that almost reached his eyes.

Nestore was achingly beautiful. A cruel, dark prince who only smiled when he could break his broken princess.

I nodded. "I expect you to."

Nestore shook his head, then lowered his gaze to the apex of my thighs. "You are mine, Amelia." He reached out and brushed his thumb over the spot where my panties outlined my folds. He traced the rose petals, making me tingle. I shivered at the gentleness of the touch. Nestore's lips parted as he stroked his thumb up and down the crease. The red of the lace rose darkened with hints of arousal as he teased me with gentle fingers. Tingles spread from my button to my core. He closed his eyes and released a low breath, looking almost in pain. He didn't open his eyes as he leaned forward.

"You taste like light…" he murmured as his lips brushed the soft skin over my hip bone. I held my breath. "Like all the summers I lost." His tongue traced the edge of my panties. "Like the promise of a future I gave up on."

I touched his crown. "Nestore."

He pressed his nose against the lace rose and inhaled deeply. My cheeks became hot.

"Sweet, but with a hint of something headier," he rasped.

"Nestore."

"Hush, Princess. Allow me one night."

He cast his eyes up. The darkness in them swallowed me whole as it always did these days. I nodded because in the depths of his eyes I caught

the glimmer of the boy I loved.

The lies we tell ourselves to make the unbearable bearable…

I had promised him all my firsts, and I would keep that promise. Tonight, he'd claim my virginity. I would give it to him. Not because I thought he wasn't capable of taking it, but because I didn't want to add more darkness to his soul.

"Amelia," Nestore murmured in reverence as his lips graced my panties. I shivered with anticipation and fright. His fingers hooked in the waistband of the silk panties and dragged them down. Only a triangle remained of my trimmed brown-red pubic hair. Nestore brought my panties to his nose and inhaled, desire flaring across his face. "Your smell lingers." He tossed the fabric to the floor and regarded my naked body reverently.

"Like my dreams."

He pushed to his feet, towering over me. "Lie down on our bed, Princess. Show me what I own."

I bristled at his wording, but I moved backward until I hit the edge of the bed, then stretched out on top of it. Nestore approached me slowly, his eyes full of hunger as they roamed my naked body. I scooted up the bed, then waited for him to do what he needed to do. He swallowed as he stepped close to the bed. I peered up, noticing the bulge in his black pants, the way his six-pack flexed with every deep breath, the harsh need in his face. He shook his head as if he was caught in a trance, then dropped the coat, revealing more of his scarred, muscled body.

Nothing about his body was boyish. He had turned himself into a weapon, his body and mind alike. He grabbed the crown and tossed it on the fur coat. "I can't wear a crown when I worship you." He climbed on the bed with me, and my body became taut with anticipation and anxiety. I wasn't sure what Nestore would do. Maybe he didn't either.

He traced his index finger over my lips, then down my throat between my breasts until he reached the apex of my thighs. He pressed the pad against my clit lightly, and I shifted up into the touch. "Beautiful," he murmured. His fingertip brushed circles over my clit for a while until my soft moans filled the room. My body responded eagerly to Nestore's touch. His attentive gaze darted between his thumb on my clit and my face.

He shook his head like a dog, then pulled his finger away from my pussy. I gasped at the loss of touch. His fingers sank into the soft skin of my

inner thigh, and he dragged my leg over to the side, opening me up. Embarrassment filled me, but my need for Nestore's touch was too potent. He slid off the bed and rounded it until he stood in front of me. His chest rose in a deep breath as his gaze took in my spread legs. He fell to his knees in front of the bed, then grabbed my ankles and tugged me toward the edge. "I'll worship you how I imagined worshipping you in my dreams, in the moments I forgot you left. My tongue will draw the first cries from your lips."

His fingers dug into the hollow of my knees and shoved my legs farther apart and up so my heels rested on the edge of the bed. I had no time to feel shame over my exposed state. He leaned forward, hot breath ghosting over me before he trailed the tip of his tongue from my ass crack all the way up to my clit where he lingered. He swirled his tongue over my clit, the tip almost playful as it nudged my swollen nub. He pressed a kiss against the same spot, then stroked along my folds, up and down, his tongue teasing my sensitive skin.

I pressed my heels into the mattress from the intense pleasure rippling through my body.

Then soft lips closed around my clit and began to suck. I gasped as the pleasure mounted with every tug of Nestore's mouth. This felt absolutely wonderful. Soon, I was panting, overwhelmed by the sensations.

Nestore pulled back and met my gaze. His chin shone with my lust. "I often fantasized about how it would feel to finally taste you, to let my tongue discover every part of you. How it would be to fuck you slowly with my tongue until you begged for my fingers. How I'd finger fuck you until you begged for my cock." He smiled and lowered his head, his fingers splaying on my inner thighs. "I knew that day would come." He pressed his mouth against my opening, then parted his lips and pushed his tongue into me slowly, making my lips part from the delicious caress of my inner walls. He moved in and out slowly, pressing his face against me so he could get as deep as possible.

Soon, my pleasure mounted again, the knot in my belly ready to burst, but he pulled out with a slight shake of his head. "Not enough." He wetted his thumb with his tongue, then pressed it against my clit before he resumed fucking me with his tongue in a torturously slow rhythm. When his thumb began to rub slowly, the pleasure quickly spiraled out of control. My toes

curled, and the knot in my belly was about to unleash. Before I could find release, Nestore pulled back and licked up my lust from between my ass cheeks, making me shudder. I had been so close, my clit was pounding angrily.

I hadn't expected to feel any pleasure tonight, convinced Nestore would make me pay with pain for the heartbreak I'd caused him. I wasn't sure that still wasn't part of his plan, but I wanted to enjoy whatever kindness he had to offer before he became the monster I often saw in his eyes.

His tongue lapped at my opening and ass, but never anywhere near my clit where I craved the touch. I wouldn't beg him, even if my body needed the release.

Nestore brushed the flat of his tongue over my clit again, making me whimper with need. I clenched, already close to my release. It wouldn't take much more. His touch became almost nonexistent, a whisper when I craved a roar. I was sopping wet, completely overwhelmed with the need to come, but Nestore only kept up the light ministrations with the very tip of his tongue. I sank my teeth into my lower lip. His eyes met mine, dark and hungry. His entire face was covered with my lust by now, and his lips were puffy from teasing me. He flicked his tongue over my clit, then slid lower, parting my folds until he found my opening and slid in. I moaned low in my throat.

"Beg me, then you'll be rewarded."

I remained silent except for the breathy moans that his tongue and lips forced out of me with every touch of my needy flesh. "You are very stubborn, my sweet Amelia."

My heart jerked hearing the endearment. He slid a single finger into me and began to pump in and out slowly. My inner walls clung to his finger, eager for the friction. When he added a second finger, I gasped at the stretching sensation, but soon relaxed. My hips rocked into the touch, but it wasn't enough. I needed my clit to be touched. "Nestore," I pressed out, desire tingeing my voice.

He raised his gaze from his glistening fingers. "What do you need?"

The hint of triumph in his voice raised my ire, and I shook my head in response. He chuckled and curled his fingers inside me, making me arch off the bed. My eyes rolled back, but I didn't tip over the edge. I needed my clit to be touched. Despair filled me. Nestore pulled out his fingers and began to

stroke my inner pussy lips lightly with his index and middle fingers. I clenched and moaned. His fingers were gentle as they circled my opening before he kept edging my pussy.

My core clenched. I was so close. So very close.

“So close,” Nestore murmured.

“I need more,” I said, not caring how needy I sounded.

“More.” Nestore brushed his tongue over my opening, following his fingers that slowly pushed into me.

“I was so very broken when I found out you’d left,” he whispered against my clit. “You were my world.”

I stilled. Nestore pushed upward and shoved down his pants. His cock sprang free, making my belly clench in a mix of anxiety and desire. My body still rang with the need for release, but my brain was caught up in the pain in Nestore’s eyes. Nestore climbed on top of me and gripped my throat, his eyes harsh. He grabbed one of my legs and hooked it over his hip, then pressed his tip against my soaked opening. Before my body caught up, Nestore thrust forward, his grip on my throat tightening.

I gasped in pain. It felt like I was being split in two. My body was stretched to the maximum.

“All your firsts are mine,” Nestore growled. With one hand on my throat, he pressed another against my throbbing clit and began to rub it almost harshly. Despite the pain, my body had been prepped for release for too long and immediately responded. Nestore pounded into me, his eyes harsh and condemning as his thumb rubbed my clit. Pain and pleasure battled until the latter exploded through me with almost blinding intensity, and my orgasm wrecked me.

Nestore glared down at me, his lips almost on mine as his hips pistoned against me, his cock unrelenting as my pussy yielded.

I kept shuddering through my release, and something wet trailed down my ass cheeks. Blood or lust? I wasn’t sure. I wouldn’t have been surprised if it were both.

Nestore’s lips crashed against mine, and his tongue ravaged my mouth like his cock did my pussy.

Soon, his movements became even harder and less controlled, spiking the pain in my core to new heights. His fingers tightened on my throat as he threw his head back for a guttural groan. I felt him release deep inside me,

filling me even further. His pumps slowed until he stilled on top of me. His face dipped forward, eyes closed, and lips parted in utter bliss.

God, he was beautiful. Even as my body screamed with pain, I didn't regret what happened. Not when it made Nestore look so content. I wanted to hate him, but I couldn't.

His eyes opened, his gaze locking on mine, and the bliss was replaced with triumph. "Your pussy milked my cock perfectly."

I only returned his stare.

He leaned further down, his lips brushing mine as he murmured, "I want you to hate me as I hated your father."

I smiled against his lips. "You'll fail."

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I wanted to hate Nestore, but I couldn't. His screams woke me at night, not my own. He'd suffered worse under my father's hand than I ever did.

Maybe I felt guilty—not even just for running, but for being unable to help him. Perhaps part of me wanted him to get the revenge he desired.

Nestore pushed off me and rolled on his back. His six-pack flexed as he knifed up to regard his blood-covered cock. I couldn't read his expression. He had seen so much blood in his life, so I doubted it bothered him. If anything, it probably turned him on.

My body rang with pain and the distant hum of pleasure. I sat up slowly, dragging the blanket with me and tugging it around my shoulders. I winced at the sharp burn between my thighs when I got up. I didn't look back at Nestore as I moved into the bathroom.

Something sticky ran down my inner thighs. I grabbed a washcloth and wetted it with warm water, then dabbed it carefully against my sore flesh, wincing at how tender I felt. The hum of my orgasm was distant, and only soreness remained. From the corner of my eye, I saw Nestore lean against the doorframe, watching me with an expression caught between confusion

and contempt. I wasn't sure if the emotions were directed at me. I felt too exhausted to discern them.

He stalked into the room and took the washcloth from me. He glared down at the pinkness on the white fabric, then held it under the water stream. I watched in confusion, not sure about his intentions. Maybe he wanted to clean himself. His cock and pelvic area were smeared with blood and our joint releases.

"Two hearts are beating in my chest. One wants to cherish and worship you. The other wants to make you submit, to make you beg for mercy and for me to fuck you," he murmured.

He surprised me when he pressed the warm cloth between my legs and began to clean my pussy and thighs with gentle moves. His brows built a hard V, his lips twisted harshly, and he didn't look me in the eye.

"I missed you, you know?" I whispered.

It was the wrong thing to say. His expression shut off, and rage flared up in his eyes. He straightened to his full height, towering over me.

His eyes burned with harshness as they settled on me. He leaned down. "I want to break you."

"You can't break what my father's already broken many years ago, Nestore."

"But I can try."

He pushed me around and pressed me against the sink. My hip bones screamed from the impact.

I braced myself against the cold marble, then lifted my gaze to Nestore's towering form. He slammed his fist against the spot where his heart was. "I thought I was unbreakable after all I had endured, then you ran!"

I nodded. Nestore could break parts of me—not my body but the foolish part of my heart that wanted to preserve the love we once shared.

"I'll fuck you bent over that sink now so you can watch me claim your body."

I was sore and brokenhearted and bone-tired, but I dug my fingers into the marble counter and met his gaze with my head held high. I wouldn't tell him to stop. "Do what you must to heal."

I didn't think this was his way to healing, but I also wasn't sure Nestore had the ability to heal.

He towered behind me, already hard again. He shook his head.

I watched his face, waiting for the triumph and the cruel smile. Nothing of the sort came. His expression stilled as his eyes slowly took in my back. Maybe he had forgotten the scars there. The slashes had all healed over the years since we had been freed from our prison, but the scars would remain. My soul carried so many more. I could only imagine what Nestore's innermost being looked like.

Silence covered us like a heavy drape.

His eyes remained the harsh pools of hatred. I hadn't expected pity from him. He wasn't capable of it. His fingers clasped my hips, and he slid forward, slower than expected.

He pushed through the last shreds of my innocence. My body yielded to him. I shivered under the pain and fullness, but held Nestore's gaze. He paused. What was he waiting for? Why didn't he plunge into me hard and fast, without mercy?

Or maybe this time the wait was my punishment, not the pain.

One of his hands moved up my side, and he cupped my breast. His thumb and forefinger began rubbing my nipple. "What—"

Nestore's other hand closed loosely around my throat, holding me in place. "Shhh, Amelia. Not a word."

He watched me intently as he rubbed my nipple. The little nub looked tiny in his strong fingers, and despite the pain between my legs, the sight of Nestore twisting my nipple with his scarred hand did something to me. A slight tingle filled my core. I traced Nestore's broad shoulders with my eyes, then his curved lips. Lips that had given me so much pleasure.

Nestore was still rock hard inside me. With every tug of his fingers, my walls seemed to soften around him. I relaxed, focused on my attraction to the man behind me.

Nestore was achingly beautiful. A cruel, dark prince who only smiled when he could break his broken princess.

Eventually, my body relaxed under the ministrations. When my walls softened, Nestore released my nipple and began to move inside me. He was slow, almost gentle. I watched him in the reflection of the mirror, the flashes of pleasure on his face, the way he glared at my back. His hands brushed the scars there almost lovingly before he slid them below me to cup my breasts again. He looked up, and our eyes met in the mirror. For a

moment, he looked at me like he had before I ran. My heart ached. I wanted him to forgive me.

His eyes turned cold. He bared his teeth and slid his hand down my body until he cupped my sex. “I’m not your slave,” he growled.

I licked my lips, and his eyes darkened. He looked almost dazed—and angry.

His fingers stroked over my clit, and it answered to his ministrations with jolts of pleasure. My body sprang to life as if it had been starved too long. His other hand cupped my throat as he circled my clit. I moaned, a deep, needy sound that reverberated against his fingers. Despite my soreness, my core pulsated with every stroke of his fingers. I needed this. I needed him, no matter how twisted all of this was.

Maybe we were both damaged beyond repair.

Arousal slickened my opening, turning the ache of overfullness into a need for more. I pushed my hips back so Nestore’s slid even deeper into me. My eyes rolled back as he hit a sweet spot that made all the pain disappear.

Nestore’s fingers around my throat flexed as he released a low growl. His finger slid down from my clit, making me whimper with need, followed by a low moan when his finger joined his cock inside me.

“I dreamed about this, about filling you with my cock for so long. Your pussy was made only for me. It was made to take my cock, to receive the pleasure and pain I can give.”

He pulled his finger out of me and brought it to my lips, parting them, so I tasted the salty bitterness of our coupling. I swiped my tongue around his finger, making his eyes close as pleasure twisted his features. He shook his head as if to free himself before he gripped my hip with his hand while the other remained on my throat. He slammed into me without warning, making me gasp. He lowered his head until his lips brushed my left shoulder almost lovingly, a gesture so very at odds with the ferocity of his claiming. He tossed his head back as if remembering himself.

There was so much hatred in his eyes. I clung to it, let it fuel my own, let it be my float in the raging ocean of my despair and confusion.

Every thrust burned through me, but soon my body numbed to the pain until only a deep throbbing of pleasure remained.

He shredded the last of my innocence with every vicious thrust. I wanted to hate him like I hated my father, as he hated me—wholeheartedly, unhesitatingly, absolutely. Yet every time I found myself teetering on the edge of this dark abyss, my eyes caught on Nestore's disfigured chest, on the scar over his heart where a nipple should have been, and on the L branded into his skin.

Nestore knew pain. But so did I.

Amelia was a creature of utter beauty. Her pink lips almost drove me insane with the need to kiss them. I wanted to brush my mouth across her flushed cheeks, feel their heat and silkiness.

Her pulse raced against my palm as I cupped her throat. I was in control.

I wasn't.

My body burst with desire for my wife, with the need to worship her, to make her scream my name in pleasure. I wanted her lust and love more than her despair and hatred. I was and would always be Amelia's slave, but she couldn't know.

I wanted her to need my cock and affection more than I needed her love and body.

I cast my gaze down, away from her gorgeous face, to preserve whatever control I had around her. I took in the way my thick cock parted her pink pussy lips, how it glistened with her lust. I eased all the way out of her until only my tip pressed up to her folds, then slammed forward. Amelia

gasped, her eyes flaring wide, as her fingers scrambled for purchase on the smooth marble surface.

Amelia felt perfect around me. Tight and hot and slick.

I needed her to submit to the pleasure before I did. I cupped her clit, stroked it with the pad of my finger until her moans increased and her hips met every thrust of mine eagerly. I pinched and stroked her little button until Amelia lost all semblance of control, until she cried out every time I slammed into her. She arched back with a harsh cry, her pussy clamping around my cock as she shuddered violently. Her eyes rolled back. She was magnificent. I pounded harder into her, chasing my own release.

My balls tightened when I filled Amelia completely. I groaned as pleasure erupted through me.

I closed my eyes and put my forehead against Amelia's shoulder blade as I released deep inside her. She was still under my body except for a very gentle tremor. Her eyes were filled with lust and worse, with affection. Why couldn't she give me hatred? Her fury was a fleeting thing, always gone before I could feast on it. I pulled out, hating her wince.

I wanted to hurt her, but I couldn't bear seeing her hurt. I gripped a new washcloth and cleaned between her legs, wishing the sight of her swollen flesh and blood would give me satisfaction. After I cleaned myself, I tossed the cloth away and lifted her in my arms. She watched me with half-lidded eyes as I carried her over to the bed we'd share and put her down. She looked magnificent against the black silk, her red hair and milky skin a stark contrast to the fabric's dark hue.

"I fear you more than I ever feared your father. I fear you for the power you hold over me. More power than he ever had over me. And what I loathe is how you don't even realize it. You wield your power with cruel ignorance, splintering my heart without a second thought," I seethed, overcome with familiar rage. She simply looked too perfect. Why did my heart continue to splinter at the mere sight of her?

When my despair had become too potent after Amelia's disappearance, I'd reached for the rage slowly building inside me. It had been comforting and easier to bear than sadness and the brutal feeling of betrayal.

Amelia shook her head with a look of sadness. She still didn't understand what she had done to me.

“You were focused on your rise to power, on revenge. I didn’t think you’d be this devastated.”

“Liar.”

She swallowed, tears filling her eyes. Despite my fury, despite my wish to destroy her as easily as she had almost ruined me, her tears still wrecked me. I hated her even for that.

“I thought the part of you who cared about me was gone. You seemed gone.”

“I needed you to remind me who I was. I needed you to help me hold on to what was left of me. But you didn’t even try.”

“I didn’t think you wanted me to. You wanted to rage and destroy, to slaughter and torture. You craved the darkness.”

“I didn’t then. I do now. In the past, I hoped you’d lead me back into the light, but now I’ll drag you into the dark with me.”

The saddest smile I’d ever seen on her face tugged at her lips. “I’ll try to be your anchor.”

My pulse picked up. I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t. I stretched out on the bed, leaving an arm’s length between us. I still often slept on the floor, but now that Amelia was my wife, I wanted to share a bed with her.

Amelia rolled over on her side until she faced me. The accusation I waited for didn’t come. She watched me silently. I shifted, trying to get comfortable on the soft mattress and with Amelia’s unwavering attention. In the past, we’d understood each other with a mere look, but she’d destroyed it by running.

I wanted the familiarity back, even if it meant she could ruin me even worse.

The hand with my ring lay flat against the silky linen. I rolled over on my side, feeling a deep longing I could hardly bear. Amelia inched her hand closer to me. I swallowed hard. This woman was too powerful.

My enemies cowered before me, and my soldiers feared and respected me. Even my own Capo regarded me like a dangerous animal he might have to put down one day, but Amelia wanted to see the good.

I slid my hand over to her until my fingers covered hers. She closed her eyes. I allowed my gaze to travel the curve of her body, lingering on her bruised hip bones and red inner thighs. Leaning up on my elbow, I gripped the blanket and covered her up to her shoulders.

She tilted her head, her brows furrowing.

“Sleep,” I urged, then turned off the lights. I didn’t have drapes on the windows. I’d spent years without a single view of the night sky. I didn’t want to be deprived of it ever again.

Outside, the music and laughter lingered as our guests celebrated without us. As Underboss, I had to provide a feast for my wedding, but no one expected me to be present. They were probably glad I stayed away.

“Do you still have nightmares?” Amelia asked softly.

I chuckled low in my throat. “Of course. But unlike in the past, now when I wake, the nightmare will be over.”

“The past can’t rest until he does,” she whispered. She didn’t have to say who she meant.

My stomach clenched violently. I ripped my hand away from hers. “He won’t get to rest. I’m not done with him.”

“Will you ever be?”

It was a question I didn’t have an answer to.

I gritted my teeth. I shoved into a sitting position, then stood. “I need fresh air. You stay in this room.”

Amelia didn’t protest. I threw on my fur coat and slipped on black boxers before leaving the room and locking the door. I didn’t yet trust Amelia, nor did I trust my guests.

Once out in the hallway, I sucked in a deep breath, trying to rid myself of Amelia’s potent scent and her grip on me. When I felt more like the man I had become, I moved downstairs, then out through the patio doors in the ballroom. A wide alabaster staircase led from the elevated patio down into the gardens, where white tents had been set up for the party. Servers carried drinks and food around, and a band played.

I stayed in the half dark behind the tents, watching the silhouettes of dancing people as I breathed in the evening air.

“Shouldn’t you be enjoying your wife?” a deep voice said from the shadows behind me. Tension filled my body, as it always did in the presence of others, except for Amelia.

I turned around to Remo, who stepped out of the dark. He scanned me, his eyebrows darting up at my attire, before he met my gaze, seeing things nobody else could. He and I weren’t so different in many regards. He, too, cared for someone more than himself: his brothers.

“I did,” I said. My body filled with triumph and heat at the memory.

Remo smiled twistedly. “Was she worth it? Worth the wait? Worth all the time and effort?”

“Tonight was worth it, yes,” I said. I couldn’t explain to my Capo how Amelia’s mere presence and not the claiming of her body made all the pain of her search worth it. Remo wouldn’t understand. For Remo, women were good for only two things: pleasure and business. And while I had every intention of enjoying Amelia’s body as much as possible and claiming more of the firsts that she had promised me, it was only a small part of what I wanted from her. The physical aspect was safer and easier.

Remo pushed his hands into his pockets, tilting his head to the side. “We have many tasks ahead of us. The Camorra needs you. I’m all for earning our soldiers’ respect, but others need to fear us like the devil, and you, Nestore, are evil incarnate in many eyes.” He chuckled. “Don’t go soft on me.”

I stared up at the night sky, marveling at its beauty, at its vastness. “The only soft thing about me is Amelia. She’s all that’s left of my humanity.”

“She’s your weakness, one our enemies will target.”

“I’ll tear them all apart limb by limb,” I snarled, rage turning my vision dark at the edges.

Remo smirked. “We should schedule your next cage fight to remind people what you are.”

“If they need reminding, I’ll remind them,” I muttered.

“Very good.” Remo scanned the tents. “I feel like spilling my cum down a throat.”

“I can recommend our club, the Medusa,” I said. “The girls there are very skilled.”

“I’ll look for Fabiano. He’ll want to join me. What about you?”

“I’m married.”

“That’s hardly an argument.” He shrugged, then moved closer, narrowing his eyes at me. “From what I hear, you never used our girls even before marriage, am I right, Nestore?”

I returned his gaze but didn’t answer. “I don’t see how this is relevant.”

“It’s relevant to my evaluation of your wife and how much protection she needs to ensure we won’t lose you.”

“I’m loyal to you and the Camorra.”

“That’s not what I mean, but I know your loyalty has its limits, and that limit is Amelia’s safety.”

I stiffened.

“No worries, Nestore. Amelia will be safe. Your story allows me to tolerate your divided loyalty.”

“I’m grateful for what you’ve done, Remo. You have my loyalty. I will lay my life down for you and the Camorra. You have my word on that.”

“But you wouldn’t hesitate to kill me if I made a move on your precious Amelia,” he said, his gaze moving to where the window of our bedroom was. “That’s not what I call unwavering loyalty.”

A growl built in my throat. Remo was a formidable opponent. I had seen him in the cage. My chances weren’t good. But madness and my love for Amelia were on my side.

Remo clamped a hand down on my shoulder. I froze. He usually didn’t touch me. Nobody was allowed to—except Amelia.

“Nino tells me I have a soft spot for you,” he murmured, his dark eyes locking on mine. He released me. “I suppose I do because I’ll give you slack for it.”

He turned his back on me and disappeared from view.

I exhaled. After my conversation with Remo, I felt the utter need to return to Amelia. When I stepped into our bedroom, her even breathing greeted me. I closed the door and listened to her sleep for a few moments. The moonlight caught on her pale arm and red curls. I approached her slowly, then sank down on the edge of the bed.

Seeing her peaceful sleeping form, I wished I had a way to keep the nightmares at bay. I couldn’t imagine her not having them. I wasn’t naïve enough to believe I wouldn’t feature in some of them.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A raw scream woke me, raising the little hairs on my arms. I blinked against the murkiness of my vision until it cleared enough for me to make out my surroundings. The dim early morning light cast its gentle glow on Nestore’s twisting form.

His expression contorted in agony. My heart clenched seeing it. I had rarely been present during his torture, but this look was painfully familiar, and so was the sound of his screams.

I sat up and touched Nestore’s arm, hoping to wake him from the throes of his nightmare. His eyes flew open, and his arms shot forward, fingers clawing at my upper arms. His harsh gaze settled on my eyes with hatred and fear.

I had my father’s eyes, a fact I despised.

“Nestore.”

His gaze registered my face, eyes tracing every contour until slowly the fear and hatred subsided. He relaxed and fell back, releasing my arms. His ragged breathing filled the ensuing silence. He stared up at the ceiling, his chest rising and falling rapidly. I wanted to console him, but worried it

would only incite his anger. I never knew if he wanted to shove me away or pull me closer. I put my fingers down on the bed beside him, as close as I could without touching him.

Nestore's eyes wandered over my bare chest. Goose bumps erupted on my skin. I didn't feel embarrassed by my nakedness around Nestore. He had witnessed me at my breaking point. It could hardly get more personal than that.

Nestore tilted his head back and stared up at the draped ceiling of the bed. "After breakfast, I need to join Remo in one of my clubs for business. I want you to accompany me. You should see my territory."

Surprise washed over me. Women were rarely involved in the business. "Why?"

Nestore fixed me with a hard look. "Because you are my wife and my secrets will be yours."

My heart throbbed. If he trusted me with his secrets, maybe not all was lost. "I'll keep them for you."

He nodded, then sat up and stood. He was naked, and the sight of him made my belly warm. I had harbored a crush for the beautiful Romano son from the moment I had seen him. Nestore Romano was still beautiful in a forbidding, haunted way, and his body was one out of every woman's dream. The scars only added to his brutal exquisiteness if I managed to separate them from the torture that created each of them. The narrow V of his hips led down to his long cock surrounded by trimmed black hair. Remembering how his thick head had widened me and filled me up so fully made that need flood my body. My eyes registered a long, thin scar below his belly button. I didn't remember it. I pushed to my feet, cringing at the intense soreness between my legs.

I limped toward Nestore and brushed my fingers over the scar. He shuddered, his gaze intense as he watched me. "This is new."

He watched my fingers as they traced the scar gently. "I have dozens of scars."

"I remember each of them, but this is new."

I kept stroking the line, mesmerized by how smooth it felt. "A knife meant to spill my bowels like my father's," Nestore murmured.

"You killed the person who did this."

"Eventually."

I swallowed, then looked down at my hand. It had moved lower, and my fingertips were now stroking the edge of his pubic hair. His length slowly filled with blood, becoming even bigger. My belly clenched, remembering the pain, remembering the pleasure. My clit pulsed, remembering my release.

Nestore grasped my hand, his expression reflecting a dark need that amplified my anxiety and my lust. “I still need to claim a few more firsts, but Remo doesn’t like to wait.” He stepped back with a pained expression.

“A few more?” I echoed, confused.

A dark smile curled his lips. His thumb brushed my lips at the same time as his other hand squeezed my ass cheek.

I swallowed hard. Nestore backed away and moved into the bathroom.

The idea of having Nestore in my mouth was tantalizing, but in my back entrance? Not so much.

Nestore emerged fifteen minutes later, dressed in black pants and his fur coat.

“We have to hurry.”

I quickly showered, then got ready and put on one of the white dresses Nestore had ordered for me. A car was waiting in the driveway when Nestore led me outside by the hand.

The moment we slid into the back seat, the driver hit the gas.

I slanted a look at his bare chest. “Why the fur?”

“People need something to occupy their idle minds. If they’re busy with my current extravagancies, they won’t linger in the past.”

It made sense. Nestore had created a figure that people could fear and admire, and he was playing his part masterfully. Or was it really played?

“Is fur kinder on your scars?” I asked in a low whisper so the driver wouldn’t hear me.

Nestore nodded once, a vulnerable admittance that gave me hope.

“I used to love wool and even linen, but I can’t stand the feeling of it on my back.” My father’s belting had left a few scars on my skin there, and they were very sensitive to certain fabrics. “I prefer silk or smooth cotton.”

Nestore reached for a strand of my hair and let it glide over his fingers. “If you want to see a scar specialist for lasering, money won’t ever be an issue. Whatever I own is yours.”

My heart swelled. I swallowed, then smiled softly. “I’ll carry my scars as you do yours. They are part of my past, and I won’t hide them.”

We arrived in front of a square building with a neon sign featuring Medusa and the name Medusa written above it.

“A strange name for a sex club,” I mused.

Nestore released my hair and smirked. “I found it fitting.” He slid out of the car, then held out his hand for me. I took it and allowed him to pull me to my feet. He didn’t release my hand as he led me toward the entrance and past two massive bouncers who stepped back respectfully as we strode through the lobby, then continued into a long room without windows. A few men were scattered around the room, mesmerized by actions on a platform.

My mouth fell open in shock. Two women lay on a rotating bed in the middle of the club. One of them lay on top of the other, and they had their heads between each other’s legs, pleasuring each other with their tongues and mouths. I had never seen other people have sex, much less two women. They cast seductive looks at the men at the surrounding tables as if to invite them to join—a spectacle.

Nestore stopped beside the platform. His neutral expression was disinterested, though I wondered if any man could remain cool watching a sight like this. Even I would probably have felt hot and bothered if I didn’t know none of these women truly enjoyed themselves. It was their job and not always voluntary.

“I spent many hours watching them to learn how exactly I would lick your pussy to make you beg for more,” Nestore mused.

My core heated, remembering how indulging Nestore’s mouth felt between my thighs, how well his tongue drove me up to unknown heights.

“You practiced with them?” I tried to sound flippant, but my chest burned with jealousy at the thought that Nestore had pleasured another woman like that. I still mourned that he had lost his firsts to someone else.

“No,” he said, his eyes almost bored, as he watched one of the women plunge two fingers into the pussy of the other, hovering above her face. “You are the first woman I pleased like that.”

I froze, filled with relief and surprise. So at least that first belonged to me. “Really?”

He tore his gaze from the women to give me a bitter smile. “I don’t lie to you. You can trust in my word.”

His fingers around my hand tightened, and he tugged me along, past the women and the men who had finally noticed us and turned to horrified spectators. Seeing fear and fascination on other people's faces when they saw Nestore was becoming normal. Nestore was a formidable sight with his height, scars, and long fur coat. At least he wore combat boots outside of the mansion. I could only imagine how much more unsettling he would look to people if he walked around everywhere barefoot.

A tall Asian woman stood behind the bar, mixing cocktails. Her dark eyes zoomed in on me for a heartbeat before she focused on Nestore, her expression not giving anything away. Tiny stars were tattooed into the skin above her left eyebrow and the word "blessed" over the right.

"Where is he?" Nestore asked.

"In the second room on the left. He's busy. Fabiano is in the office," she said. Something about her intonation was slightly off, and a closer look revealed she had two barbell piercings in her tongue. Her eyes met mine for a heartbeat, curious, before she busied herself with her work again.

Nestore tugged me farther along through another door. Behind it, several women sat on a half-moon-shaped sofa and had a breakfast of donuts and black coffee.

They fell silent when they spotted us. Their gazes lingered on me before they lowered their heads. The oldest, a very tall, slender African American woman, maybe in her early thirties, rose to her feet. "Do you want anything, Mr. Romano?"

"No," he clipped. Without another word, we moved along toward a door at the end of the corridor. I couldn't help but wonder if Nestore had slept with any of these women. They worked for him. It was common for powerful men to use the women who worked for them like that. What else had they done? One of them had very voluminous lips, and I couldn't stop thinking about how she might have pleasured Nestore with them. It made my heart ache and made me want to claim Nestore for myself in every way. He wore a ring that marked him as mine, but how much did that mean in our world?

Nestore opened the door to his office when another door creaked open at the end of the corridor. Remo stepped out, shirtless and with an unbuckled belt.

I averted my eyes as he approached us and buckled his belt. “Your girls are indeed very skilled. They kept me entertained for longer than most.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I’ll extend the compliment,” Nestore said neutrally.

I glanced at his passive face. Had he tested their skills?

I shoved the thought aside. It was the past. Nestore was mine now. Or was he?

Remo’s gaze hit me with its cold scrutiny. I forced a smile. “Maybe you can learn a trick or two to please your husband.”

“She pleases me,” Nestore clipped, and my heart swelled with warmth.

Remo looked doubtful but didn’t say anything. Silence reigned around us except for the low hum of chatter and the occasional clang of a cup.

“I’m short on time,” Remo muttered.

Nestore motioned for him to go ahead into the office. He and I entered right behind Remo. Inside, Fabiano lounged on the massive brown leather sofa and watched a video on his phone. Upon closer look, I could tell it was a cage fight. He sat up when we entered, his eyebrows rising when he spotted me. His piercing blue eyes were as cold as ice. His face suggested he was everyone’s darling, but I knew better than to trust a pretty face.

“Nestore wants to show her the business,” Remo said. “But first, we need to watch one of the most successful fights in Camorra betting history.”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to know more about the business, especially if it involved naked women and violent fights. Nestore turned on a screen on the wall across from the sofa, and the image of a pit appeared. It looked like a Roman amphitheater. It had to be the fighting pit where Nestore had taken me shortly after my arrival. Or did the Camorra have more than one like that? They liked to unsettle people, and that definitely did the trick.

“This is the kind of extravagance only an Underboss in LA can pull off,” Remo said with a twisted smile.

I shuddered at the memory of the fights that Nestore and I had witnessed there. Fabiano and Remo exchanged a look. I didn’t care if they thought I was sensitive. The presence of another brutal place so close to where Nestore and I lived was horrendous. The basement was bad enough. Nestore would never find peace if he kept violence in his life.

Two men entered the pit, armed with shields and spears, just like gladiators. I shook my head.

“Bets are terrific, according to Nino, especially online. It doesn’t even matter who fights. Though your fights and whenever the wildcats are involved trump everything.”

“They are. It’s a spectacle that encourages risky bets,” Nestore said proudly.

I turned my back on the screen. After a moment, Nestore touched my shoulder and held out a black credit card. “This is obviously too soon. Go to Francoise with your guards. You need a few dresses to impress a crowd. I want you to look like the wife of a Roman emperor.”

I gave him an incredulous look but took the card. Fabiano and Remo exchanged looks that suggested they thought shopping was all women were good for. I didn’t care. I just wanted out.

He picked up his phone and called someone. The two men who had guarded me on the premises before appeared in the doorway a couple of minutes later. In their matching black suits with black ties, they reminded me of coroners. Maybe that was Nestore’s intention. Morbidity was his favorite pastime.

I hesitated, wishing Nestore could come with me.

He kissed me briefly, taking me by surprise, before he turned back to Remo and Fabiano.

After another fleeting glance at the brutal fight on the screen, I left with my guards, and they took me to Francoise.

She didn’t bat an eye when I told her I needed to look like a Roman empress. Working for Nestore, she probably only got unusual requests. I tried to distract myself with shopping as some people could, but my mind remained in the Medusa with Nestore.

When I spotted a panel of bloodred silk, I asked Francoise to create something for me. “I need it for tonight. Can you sew something in a couple of hours?”

Her eyes widened, but she gave a resolute nod. “A simple spaghetti strap dress with an A-line.”

“I’ll wait as you work.”

I sank into a chair and watched Francoise cut the silk, then set up everything on her table with focused precision.

“How did you meet Nestore?” I asked when she turned on her sewing machine. Her shoulders rounded, and she tossed me a shaky smile.

“I was locked up in a cage in a man’s bedroom. I didn’t know his name. He kidnapped me…and used me for his needs.” Her voice drifted off. Her gaze was distant, and the stiff line of her body betrayed her struggle to maintain composure.

“One day, Mr. Romano came in when the man was busy with me. I thought maybe he would join in because that happened sometimes, but he ripped him away from me and cut his…his privates off.”

“Oh,” I whispered. “I’m…I’m sorry this happened to you.”

She nodded and frowned down at the fabric in concentration. “It’s over. He suffered for what he did. That’s my consolation.”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that. Clearing my throat, I asked, “When was that?”

“Twenty-two months ago. I used to live in San Diego. I worked as a seamstress there too, but I didn’t have my own shop. Mr. Romano told me he needed a seamstress and bought the shop for me. I have worked for him and the Camorra ever since. I also work for other people, but his demands always come first.”

I nodded. “Did you and him…?”

Francoise’s eyes grew wide with horror. “No. Oh no. I’m done with men. I have my cats and my work. That’s all I need, thank you very much. Your husband is very devoted to you.”

I let out a small laugh. Devotion… that was one way to put it.

When I returned home in the late afternoon, Nestore wasn’t there yet. I hovered in the creepy entrance hall, my gaze drawn to the corridor that led down to the basement. My father must be in there. Maybe others, too.

I wanted to speak to my father. I wasn’t even sure why. But I needed a clean break and a final conversation with the man who should have loved me but never did. It seemed like a necessary step toward closure.

I took a few hesitant steps toward the door to the steep staircase, my heart pounding in my chest.

“I wouldn’t do this if I were you,” Niccolo warned.

I whirled around and found him standing a few steps behind me. Of course, I was never alone in this place. Nestore wouldn’t give me another chance to run.

“Are you spying on me?” I asked with a scowl.

“I am, and I’m telling you that you should stay out of the basement. Nestore’s trust in you is fragile, and a visit with your old man wouldn’t help.”

“I don’t want to help him or anything. I just want to see him for closure.”

“Your father is a master at manipulation. You think a conversation with him will really give you closure?”

Probably not, but I needed to at least try. “Why does Nestore keep him alive?”

Niccolo’s expression tightened. “I don’t know. He doesn’t share his innermost thoughts with me. Maybe he would with you, if you stopped breaking his heart.”

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

After my conversation with Niccolo, I moved up to the primary bedroom. I felt restless. This place kept my mind in an uproar. The shadows seemed to whisper the horrors from the past. Everything was dark. The windows never let enough light into the big rooms.

I changed into the new red dress. It had a plunging neckline and a high slit. I wanted to appear seductive and bold, not like the girl who couldn't handle a pit fight and who didn't know how to please a man. I wasn't sure why I felt the need to prove myself. Nestore had forced me to marry him. He had searched for me for more than two years. He obviously wanted me, yet what I had seen today and the knowledge that he hadn't waited for me made me nervous.

On my way to the dining room, I stopped in the library. It was the only room where I didn't feel quite as haunted. I picked up a book about roses and garden design before I moved into the dining room. Maybe one day I could plant my own flower beds and create bouquets that would brighten these forlorn halls.

The moment I entered the room, a young maid, maybe my age, stepped in with a pleasant smile. “Do you want to take your dinner now?”

I shook my head. “No, I’ll wait for my husband.”

Uncertainty flashed across her face, and she parted her lips as if to argue, then snapped them shut. She nervously tucked a nonexistent strand behind her ear. Her hair was slicked back in a tight bun without a single loose hair.

“What is it? You can say what you want.”

She looked around nervously, almost as if she worried the walls would attack her. Considering the number of trophies on this wall, mostly animal bone this time, I couldn’t blame her.

“It’s just that the Master doesn’t usually eat.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “He must eat. He’s human.”

She let out a nervous giggle. “He usually eats dinner up in his room. We put it in front of his door and take away the empty dishes later.”

Almost as if he still were a prisoner. My belly clenched at the thought.

“Oh. But now I’m here, and I’m sure he wants to share dinner with me.”

She nodded jerkily. “Okay. I’ll let the kitchen know. When do you want to have dinner?”

I wasn’t sure when Nestore would be home. I didn’t have his number. I didn’t even have a cell phone. “As soon as he’s back.”

“Of course.” She smiled shakily. “Would you like something to drink?”

Why not. “Could you bring me a glass of the red wine my husband always drinks?”

“It’ll be with you shortly.” She backed away, then slid out of the room noiselessly.

I sucked in a deep breath. This entire place, even the staff, felt like it was straight out of a horror movie. I blew out the breath and squared my shoulders. I made a beeline for the two leather armchairs in front of the massive black marble fireplace and curled up in one, then opened the book.

The maid appeared beside me, making me jump.

“I’m sorry. The Master prefers us to move silently.”

“Well, I prefer not to be scared to death,” I said with a smile that softened my words.

She bobbed her head quickly, then put down the wineglass on the small marble coffee table between the armchairs.

“What’s your name?”

“Mindy,” she said, then rushed back out as if the prospect of small talk terrified her.

I took a deep sip of the wine, then relaxed against the soft leather. Age had softened the firm material. These two chairs, like the rest of the furniture, had already been in this place when my father and our family had moved in. Maybe they were from Nestore’s childhood, and that was the reason he couldn’t part with them. I opened the book and began reading the introduction, an overview of the history of rose cultivation.

The clock struck eight o’clock when a shadow moved past the open dining room door. I had left it open so I would see Nestore walking past.

After a moment, the shadow materialized before the door. Nestore stepped into the dim light of the dining room. I put down the book on the coffee table and rose to my feet.

He froze mid-step when he spotted me. His eyes scanned my dress, brows snatching together. The look on his face wasn’t one I had hoped for. It was hard to describe, on the verge of haunted. He shook his head as he stalked toward me.

“Don’t,” he rasped.

I frowned up at him in confusion. “Don’t what?”

He took my hand and pulled me closer, then began to tug at my clothes almost desperately. Eventually, the dress came off and pooled at my feet. My underwear, too, was red, and he stripped me out of it as well. I was speechless. Of course, I’d hoped this evening would end with my clothes on the floor, but not like this.

Nestore cradled my face, his eyes pleading.

“Never wear red again, Amelia. I saw too much red on your skin.”

Remembering how often I had been covered in blood, mostly Nestore’s, I shuddered and understood his aversion to the color.

“Wear white. Only white.”

I nodded. I touched his chest, feeling his heart race under my palms. “Only white,” I promised in a whisper, feeling his heart slow.

“I just thought…” I trailed off.

His eyes left my face, traveling the length of my naked body. He looked almost dazed when he met my gaze again. Desire filled his eyes and kindled my own.

“Are you mine alone?” I asked, terrified of the answer. Nestore had promised me the world when we had been locked in the basement. He had promised me his firsts.

Nestore’s brows puckered as if he didn’t understand the question. His fingers on my face tightened. “I searched for you for eight hundred and one days, Amelia. I dreamed about you every night. I almost went mad when I thought I wouldn’t find you, so what makes you think I haven’t always been yours alone?”

I shrugged. “You were with other women. Maybe you think you can punish me by continuing to do so even when we’re married.”

He shook his head with a look of incredulity. “I’m faithful to you. I can’t bear anyone’s touch but yours.”

I pursed my lips, confused, but his mouth came down on mine before I could say anything else. His tongue parted my lips as his hands held my face. Our kiss quickly morphed into something needy and almost desperate.

I tore away, breathless. We stood in the middle of the dining room, and I was entirely naked. What if staff came in?

“They wouldn’t dare to interrupt us,” Nestore rasped as his palms traveled down my cheeks over my throat until he cupped my breasts.

“I told them we would have dinner together as soon as you were home.”

A sharp knocking sounded, and the door swung open. Nestore tugged me against his chest and wrapped me in his fur coat, covering my nakedness.

Mindy’s eyes became saucer-like. “I apologize!”

She turned, horrified.

“Put the food on the table,” Nestore ordered in a low voice. “And next time, you wait before you barge in.”

“Of course, Mr. Romano.” She rushed over to the dining room table, avoiding looking our way.

The feel of Nestore’s strong body pressed up against my naked flesh made me long for his touch, but the shock of Mindy’s presence had dampened the first rush of arousal.

The moment she left, Nestore released me from his tight hold, but I remained where I was. I peered up at his face, wanting to memorize every sharp angle of it.

“This place feels cursed, but in your arms, I feel safe.”

“You are safe, and this place…” He looked around. “This place carries history.”

“It carries pain and misery, too.”

“You can fill it with better memories. In a couple of years, these walls will whisper with your moans and lustful cries, with your laughter and beautiful voice.”

I swallowed hard. “That’s what you want?”

He lowered his head and squeezed his eyes shut. “I want conflicting things, but I want you.”

The scent of food—meat and herbs, and starchy potatoes—carried over to us. My belly rumbled. I hadn’t eaten in too long, but pressed up to Nestore completely naked, I wasn’t sure if my need for nourishment trumped my desire for his touch.

“You’re hungry,” he rasped against my ear, then nipped my lobe lightly.

I shivered, my nipples puckering despite the heat of Nestore’s closeness. “What about you?”

“I’m hungry in every sense of the word.” He kissed the side of my throat. “Let me feed you, then let me feast on you.”

I nodded. That sounded like a plan I could get on board with. Nestore tugged me toward the dining table. “Shouldn’t I get dressed?” I asked.

“No. Stay as you are.” A bowl of steaming potato gnocchi, another of a stew of big meat chunks, and a serving platter of steamed chard awaited us.

Nestore sank into his chair and pulled me down on his lap. The feel of his strong thighs beneath my ass made my body flush with more heat. He put meat, gnocchi, and chard onto the plate in front of him, then speared a gnocchi, swiped it through the sauce, and brought it to my lips. I opened my mouth and closed my lips around the fluffy ball. It tasted buttery and indulgent. I hummed my pleasure, causing Nestore’s gaze to darken with hunger.

He speared a piece of meat and fed it to me next. His eyes burned with intensity as he fed me one piece after the other. I picked up another fork and lifted a piece of gnocchi to his mouth. “Now it’s my turn to feed you.”

“You fed me in the past,” he murmured. His hand closed around my knee, then slid higher, along my inner thigh. My lips parted when he cupped my mound and dipped a long finger between my folds and into me. He took the gnocchi from me and chewed slowly as his finger pumped into me.

Despite my soreness, I was soaked. He never took his eyes off me as he fed me another bite of meat while fingering me at an unhurried pace. I leaned back, barely able to chew from the sensations coursing through me. His long finger massaged my inner wall while the heel of his hand pressed against my clit.

“Amelia,” he rasped as he pulled out his finger. He picked up a piece of gnocchi with it and brought it to his mouth, his eyes closing in pleasure as he groaned. “Your taste…”

I swallowed hard. Nestore met my gaze, then he dipped a finger into me again before he brought it to my mouth. “Taste yourself.”

I parted my lips, and he dipped his finger in. I swirled my tongue around it, marveling at the heady taste. He fed me a few more pieces of gnocchi and stew with his fingers before I felt hungry for something else.

As if he could feel my shifting need, he growled, “Lie down on the table.”

I got up, then turned around and hoisted myself up on the smooth wooden surface. Nestore pushed my legs apart. He picked up his fork and speared a piece of meat that he brought to his lips at the same time as he dipped his middle finger between my pussy lips, then slid it into my opening.

I moaned softly as he fingered me slowly, his eyes on my pussy while he ate his dinner. He added a second finger, making me wince briefly before pleasure banished any thought of soreness. He watched me as if he wanted to devour me, as if I was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen, and it turned me on even more. I could have watched Nestore watching his fingers fucking me all night. He pulled out his fingers again and showed them to me. They were glistening with my arousal, shiny and slick. He pushed them into his mouth and sucked them clean before he slammed them into me again. This time, he didn’t move slowly. His fingers pistoned into me hard and fast. He shoved to his feet with a sound of impatience and pressed his lips over my clit, sucking it into his mouth.

I cried out as stars danced before my eyes. I came with a resounding cry, my back arching up. The cutlery clanged as the table trembled under my orgasm. Nestore kept sucking my clit as he pounded me with his fingers until I couldn’t take anymore. “Enough,” I gasped.

His fingers stopped deep inside me, and he exhaled against my clit. His lustful eyes met mine as he slowly pulled out of me, then he pushed my thighs even farther apart and began to lap up my release. He never took his eyes off me as he dipped his tongue into my opening, then licked along my swollen lips.

I shuddered, overwhelmed by the sensations. He kissed my pussy before he straightened and pulled my body around so my head now lay at the edge of the table. He pulled down his trousers, making his cock spring free before my face. His thick head glistened with precum. “It’s time I claim another first and fuck your beautiful mouth.”

I licked my lips, nervous and eager at once. Nestore raked his fingers through my hair and tilted my head to the side. He stepped closer so his tip brushed my lips, then slid in. I widened my lips to accommodate him, groaning as I tasted his precum on my tongue. He slid deeper until his tip hit the back of my throat, and I gagged.

Nestore’s fingers in my hair tightened. “Relax. You can take all of me.”

I drew in a deep breath through my nose and slackened my jaw. Nestore pushed in deeper, and finally, he settled all the way in me, his balls pressing against my chin. He groaned, low in his throat, his six-pack flexing. He looked breathtaking. His hungry gaze hit me, and with his hand in my hair keeping me in place, he began to slide in and out slowly. His other hand curled loosely around my throat. “I can feel my cock.”

I couldn’t speak, so I hummed my approval as I hollowed my cheeks. Nestore’s movements quickly became jerky, and his fingers on my throat flexed.

With a guttural groan, he released in my mouth. I had trouble swallowing as he twitched on my tongue. He moved back so only his tip remained on my tongue as the last waves of his orgasm wrecked his body. His release dripped out of the corner of my mouth and down my chin. He pulled out, then wiped his thumb over my chin before he bent down and kissed me firmly. His tongue dipped in, and another moan vibrated in his chest. He drew back with a sated smile. “Tasting myself in your sinful mouth is the best thing I can imagine.”

I sank my teeth into my lower lip with a small smile, exhausted and utterly sated. Nestore kissed me again, then he picked me up and pressed me against his chest. “Time for sleep, Amelia.”

I carried Amelia upstairs, cradled against my chest, her cheek pressed up to the very heart that beat only for her. For once, my pulse was steady, and I felt calm and relaxed. Maybe this was what peace meant.

With Amelia in my hold, it felt within reach. I lowered her to the bed and regarded her for a while, the perfect curve of her hips, the dip of her waist, the tantalizing triangle between her thighs. I wasn't sure if I'd ever get enough of the sight of her, the taste of her, the feel of her. I stretched out beside her and pulled her against my body. She slung her leg over my hip, bringing us even closer. I dipped my head until my nose brushed her collarbone and drew in a deep breath. Amelia's sweetness mingled with the headiness of sex. "Only you can get this close."

The idea that anyone would wrap themselves around me like she did tightened my throat and made me want to lash out brutally.

Amelia let out a low, content hum, sounding drowsy. It was midnight. I rarely slept this early.

I waited for Amelia's breathing to even out before I untangled myself from her, covered her with the blankets, and got up. One thing was missing from my nightly routine: a visit with Achille Lamorgese.

Sometimes it seemed impossible that he could have fathered such a wonderful creature as Amelia.

Draping my fur coat over my shoulders and putting on pants, I slipped out and headed downstairs. The cold from the stone of the basement seeped

into my bare feet, but didn’t make me shy back. This floor, its unrelenting cold, had been my home for so long.

When I arrived at the last cell, Lamorgese cowered on his bed. He stirred, and his fearful gaze found me. I sank into the chair I kept in front of the cell for my nightly visits. In the beginning, I had tortured Lamorgese every time I came down here. I had been desperate to dish out the same pain I had suffered for years. Nowadays, I contented myself with his fear. He never knew when I’d feel like causing him pain, and that was far worse than the certainty.

“Amelia is now my wife,” I said, my chest swelling with triumph.

“She ran from you. Why would you marry her?”

The sting of betrayal came suddenly. I masked my emotions. Lamorgese wouldn’t best me, especially not by weaponizing Amelia. “Because I want her. Because it pleases me to know that one Lamorgese rots in my basement while the other cries out for my cock.”

A bitter taste spread on my tongue. Talking about Amelia like that felt… wrong. But this was about more than her and me.

“I bet she cried out for other cocks while she was gone,” he rasped.

I jerked up and unlocked his cell, then stormed in, overcome by rage. I kicked and punched him. The last time I had been this unrestrained had been more than a year ago. Amelia could make my blood boil in so many ways.

I eased up and straightened, my breathing harsh. Lamorgese lay curled up on the floor, breathing raggedly. “Amelia’s firsts are all mine, and you will hold your tongue in the future, or I’ll have to cut out what’s left of it.”

A movement drew my head around. A flash of white disappeared from view. I rushed out, locked the cell, and set off after her.

I caught up with Amelia on the stairwell to the first floor. My fingers closed around her arm, and I turned her around. She stumbled against me and would have lost her balance, had I not blocked the step below. She gripped my shoulders, her eyes wide and glassy.

“You shed tears for your father?” I growled.

Her brows puckered, and pity filled her eyes. “I’m crying for you. For what you’ve become. You act like him and don’t even realize it.”

I pushed her against the banister. “I’m not like him!”

“Not to me, and not in every regard, but in the way you treat him, you are.”

I glowered at her, overcome with rage. How could she compare me to him? Didn’t she see how much I cared for her, how I treated her like a princess despite her betrayal? “Go back to bed.” My wrath swirled in my body, clouding my thoughts. I didn’t want to lose control, but I was close.

“Nestore—”

“Go to bed!” I roared.

Amelia took a step up, then she whirled around and hurried upstairs. I stalked down to the foyer and then out into the gardens. I drew in a few deep breaths and gripped the stone balustrade of the balcony. I’d spent the night watching the sky as I had done so many nights before. Sometimes, it took only a few hours for the rage to subside. Sometimes all night.

I had a feeling the latter would be the case this time.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

My face was sticky with last night's tears when I woke shortly after sunrise. Nestore wasn't there. I put on a bathrobe and slippers before I left the bedroom in search of him. I prayed that he hadn't spent the night in the basement torturing my father. I could only imagine what that would do to him.

I found him in the gardens, asleep on one of the many stone benches along the pathway. He lay on his back, his legs dangling over the armrest, his hands folded on his chest. He looked as if he had fallen asleep while stargazing, and that thought made me smile.

My steps crunched on the pathway. Nestore startled awake, his body tensing as he reached for the knife at his calf holder. When his eyes registered me, he lay back and released a deep breath. "What are you doing out here?"

"I was worried about you when you weren't in bed with me," I said, taking a few steps closer.

He slanted me a wary look. "Do you really want me to spend the night in bed with you? I'm a monster, remember?" He sat up.

My brows puckered. “Of course. Did I ever push you away?”

“You didn’t,” he said, his voice almost curious. He shoved to his feet and bridged the distance between us. He was barefoot again. I wasn’t sure how he could stand the pebbles against his feet. My thin slippers barely offered protection, and it definitely bothered me. On the other hand, Nestore had scar tissue there, too.

He stretched his arms over his head, and I allowed myself to admire his muscles, then flushed when his gaze settled on me. He extended a hand. “Let’s take a walk. I want to show you something.”

Worry tightened my belly. The last time he’d said something similar, we’d ended up watching the brutal fights in the pit. I really didn’t want to witness any bloodshed before breakfast.

Despite my apprehension, I put my hand in his. He closed his fingers around mine and tugged me along. We went down the winding path, past the rose maze, which made me shiver, and past the rotunda with the Roman fighting pit until we reached the very edge of the premises. My eyes widened when enclosures came into view. The first one closest to us held two lions, a female and a male, who lounged on a massive boulder that overlooked their spacious enclosure. The fence was at least twelve feet high and curved inward, with additional barbed wire as a deterrent. When they were my father’s pets, they lived in small cages so Father could easily reach them. One time, he had made me pet their fur while they were being drugged. My initial awe had turned to pity when I’d looked into their unfocused eyes.

The tiger in the enclosure to the left of the lions was frolicking in a lake and licking a massive ice cube with pieces of meat in it. In the last enclosure, the cheetahs paced along the fence, a groove in the ground from daily habit. Their enclosure offered them enough space to run, but they seemed to stick mainly to a small circular walkabout within the scope of their former enclosure.

“When I first had the bigger enclosure built for them, they hardly set foot into the rest of their area. They stuck to the small route they were used to, prisoners of years of captivity in a small cage, but now they venture out often.”

Nestore brought his fingers to his mouth and let out a shrill whistle. Both cheetahs stopped in their tracks, and even the lions and tiger perked

up.

“Come on. Let’s give them the chance to hunt.”

“Hunt?” I echoed, worried about what the wildcats would hunt.

Nestore led me toward a platform at the end of the cheetah enclosure. A small house harbored a freezer and a fridge, plus a massive wooden board with a butcher’s knife. Nestore walked over to the fridge and took out a rabbit, fur and all. I grimaced at the sight of the cute animal hanging lifelessly in Nestore’s grip.

Nestore’s eyebrows climbed his forehead. “The cheetahs need to eat, and we had beef stew yesterday.”

“I know I’m being a hypocrite, I just prefer not to see the whole animal.”

“It eases the conscience but not the guilt.”

He had a point. Only because I was served a cute piglet as a cutlet didn’t mean it hadn’t once looked like a real animal.

“Come on.” He took another rabbit, then motioned at two steel ropes with hooks attached to them. He fastened the rabbits to the hooks. One wall of the house had a large window overlooking the enclosure. The two cheetahs sat on a stone platform right in front of it, obviously familiar with the procedure and eager for their prey.

Nestore picked up a small remote I hadn’t noticed before and pressed a button that made a flap near the ceiling slide open. Then he pressed another button, and the rabbits shot out, dangling by the hooks. It almost looked as if they were actually racing. The rope dipped lower shortly after it entered the enclosure, so the cheetahs had a chance to chase it. Both animals hunted the mechanically moving rabbit corpses with a speed that made me gasp. Eventually, they caught up with their prey, and each cheetah captured a rabbit. They split up to opposite ends of the enclosure to eat their food in peace.

Nestore watched them with a small smile. “At the beginning, they didn’t even chase; now they’re rediscovering their instincts. It’s a thing of beauty.”

“It is,” I agreed softly. These animals had been prisoners and lost part of themselves because of it. Maybe Nestore recognized himself in them.

“Why do you use them in pit fights?” Nestore touched my back and led me back out of the house toward the lion enclosure.

“Not all of them, only the male lion and the tiger. They displayed great joy when prisoners accidentally climbed inside their enclosures shortly after you ran. I decided to give them the chance to get payback on certain humans as long as they do it without prompting or drugs.”

I shook my head. Nestore made his twisted actions almost sound… reasonable.

I looked past the three enclosures but only found the fence marking the end of the premises. “Where are the chimps?” My father had kept two chimps that he’d dressed up in human clothes and drugged so they would be complacent. Sometimes they’d even been allowed inside the mansion. It had freaked me out because their eyes had been too knowing and not like an animal’s at all.

“When we stopped giving them drugs, they became too dangerous. We had to remove them from the premises. They killed two of my men and always made a ruckus that upset the cats.”

“So you killed them?”

“No, they are in another enclosure, but they are very aggressive. With their conditioning, you can’t release them into the wilderness, and sanctuaries wouldn’t take them because of their volatile behavior. They are too traumatized.”

I pressed my lips together. These animals and Nestore had so much in common. Nestore extended his hand for me to take. I slid mine into his without hesitation and allowed him to lead me back up the pathway and away from the enclosures.

Nestore stopped abruptly.

“What’s wrong?”

I followed his narrowed gaze toward the mansion where Niccolo stood on the balcony that led into the grand entry hall.

“Did you expect him?”

His tight jaw and furrowed brows answered my question. He gave a small shake of his head, his fingers around mine tightening. “Niccolo wouldn’t show up unannounced unless it’s serious.”

Nestore tugged me along, his steps long and purposeful. I had to run to keep up with him. When we reached the balcony, Niccolo scanned me. I was still in my nightgown and silk bathrobe, and the thin fabric didn’t hide how the cool morning air affected my body.

Nestore stepped in front of me, his voice sharp as a whip. “Why are you here, cousin?”

Niccolo met Nestore’s gaze, hesitation reflecting on his face. “Maybe we should discuss the matter alone.”

I stiffened. Was it because he considered me a security risk or simply too weak?

“Amelia is my wife. She will stay unless I decide she must leave. Now tell me why you’re here. I’m losing my patience.”

“You don’t have any patience to spare,” Niccolo drawled, then quickly continued. “Achille Lamorgese’s nephew Corvin contacted me thirty minutes ago.”

My lips parted in surprise. Corvin was alive? I would have thought Nestore had killed him the moment he claimed power. Corvin was a slimy, sadistic pig. He wasn’t a loss to this world.

“He and a couple of Lamorgese’s supporters kidnapped Luciano Lamorgese from his daycare.”

“No!” I gasped, my heart clenching as tears sprang into my eyes. Luciano was only two. He was a small, innocent kid. “Oh God, Flavia. She must be heartbroken and terrified.”

Nestore’s expression remained hard. “What do they want with the boy? He’s too young to serve as their future leader, and from what I know about Corvin, he thinks he has it in him to become Achille’s successor one day.”

Niccolo nodded. “They called and told me the kid will die if we don’t exchange Achille with him. They want a reply within the next hour, or they’ll start cutting off his fingers and send them over to us.”

“I’m wearing their friends’ fingers as a crown, and they think I’ll break because they threaten the son of my tormentor?” he snarled.

I shot him an incredulous look. He had to save Luciano! My father’s life was worthless, but Luciano needed to survive. He needed to be spared further trauma and pain. “Nestore,” I whispered, gripping his arm. He narrowed his eyes at me. “Luciano is a small boy. He’s innocent. Wouldn’t you have wanted someone to save you from my father’s clutches? You have the power to spare a child the trauma you had to endure. Do it for me.”

Niccolo chuckled. “See, I told them the same you just said, Nestore, but they knew you’d do it for her. They know how powerful Amelia Lamorgese is.”

“Amelia Romano,” I corrected him. “And it has nothing to do with power.”

“But it does,” Nestore said as he turned toward me. He cupped my neck and tilted my head up. “You hold so much power, and you don’t even realize it. Remo knows. Niccolo knows. They know.” He let out a harsh laugh. “Even I know, but I’m unable to escape.”

I swallowed hard. “Will you save him?”

“How could I not with you looking at me like that?”

“You’re giving up Achille for her?” Niccolo interjected in a tone of disbelief.

Nestore slanted him a hard look. “Of course not. Achille Lamorgese won’t ever leave these walls alive.”

My eyes widened.

“But I’ll save the boy and kill the men who think they can blackmail me. They’ll find an end worthy of their crimes.”

Anxiety filled my insides and made me feel on the verge of throwing up. What if something went wrong? What if Luciano got hurt? “Is my father really worth risking a child’s life for?”

Niccolo’s eyebrows shot up, then he gave Nestore a look of concern as if he worried he would unleash his wrath on me. For a moment, rage bubbled up in Nestore’s eyes, but then he gave me a hard smile. “Your father is worth less than dirt, which is why I won’t allow him to create a new life for himself. He’ll stay in his hopeless prison until I decide to end his misery.” He cupped my neck again. “But the boy will be safe. These men are followers, not leaders. My plan will succeed, and they’ll die. Trust me.”

I nodded, even as my throat tightened. “What about Flavia? Can I talk to her? She must be devastated. Maybe she doesn’t even know what happened.”

“After I ended the call with Corvin, I contacted her for further information. We need the full picture before we make any decisions. She was alerted by the staff of the day care facility, and was in a panic when I called. She didn’t give up any information. She was overcome by emotion.”

I gave him an incredulous look. “They kidnapped her child!”

“I’m aware of that, but it won’t help anyone if we get emotional now, too,” Niccolo drawled.

“I doubt that’s a risk with you both,” I muttered. Nestore’s fingers against my neck flexed, his eyes locking on mine. “We’ll fly her over. Now that I know she poses a risk to the Camorra’s safety, she has to move back to LA so that I can guarantee her and the boy’s safety.”

“Flavia won’t ever agree to move back into the mansion.”

“And she won’t. This is our home, not hers. She’ll get her own place. One that I determine. She won’t get a choice.”

I nodded because the determination in Nestore’s eyes told me arguing would be stupid. And part of me was happy that Flavia would be back in the city. That way, at least I would get the chance to see her and Luciano. My heart clenched. “Please save him. Please.” I pressed my palms against his chest. Nestore’s expression softened a heartbeat before he gripped my wrists, removing my palms from his chest, and looked at Niccolo. “We should start planning our next move. Tell them we’ll exchange the boy for Achille at the Port of Los Angeles, in the closed Terminal 24. Tonight. I don’t want to waste any time.”

“What if they don’t agree to the place?”

“Tell them Achille can’t spare losing any more parts of his body, and they should count themselves lucky I’m willing to exchange him at all.”

Niccolo gave a terse nod. “I’ll call them right away. When will you share your plan with me?”

Nestore slanted me a careful look. “In my office, in thirty minutes.”

Nestore touched my lower back and nudged me into the house. “Come. You need to get dressed, and so do I. Today will be busy.”

I allowed him to lead me to our bedroom, then moved into the bathroom, needing space to get a grip on my overwhelming emotions. I began to undress. Nestore followed me and leaned in the doorway, then watched me the entire time instead of changing into his clothes himself. When I was naked, I stood still and wrapped my arms around myself, feeling on the verge of a breakdown. “What if your plan fails? What if they figure out you don’t have my father with you?”

Nestore tilted his head with a curious look, then he stalked toward me and gripped my throat loosely, tipping my head back and claiming my mouth for a deep kiss. “They’ll be fighting for their lives the moment they realize I tricked them. Their last worry will be Achille Lamorgese, trust

me.” He kissed my throat. “I’m doing this for you, because I can’t bear to see you cry.”

He ran a palm along my side over the curve of my hip before he pressed his palm against my pussy. “This is mine. You are mine, Amelia. Don’t forget it. I’m doing this because I want your happiness despite what you did. You hold power over me.” He released a harsh breath.

“Say it,” he growled.

“Say what?” My lashes fluttered when he pushed a finger into me and curled it deep inside me.

“That you are mine.”

“I’m yours.”

He kissed me hard, his grip on my throat tightening. “When I come home victorious, I’ll remind you, and me.”

I blinked up at him as he stepped back from me and began to change into dark pants and socks, but nothing else. “Tonight, I’ll be back with the boy.”

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Amelia’s worried gaze followed me out of the room. She felt responsible for the boy. I knew she’d be heartbroken if something happened to him. That was my main incentive to save him, but surprisingly, it wasn’t the only one. I wanted to spare the child the torture and trauma I had endured. My rescue had come too late to save the boy I had been, but I had become a man capable of doing atrocities. Today, Corvin and his co-conspirators would learn just how atrocious I could be.

Niccolo paced the open space between the massive wood desk I never used and the armchairs facing yet another fireplace. The walls were filled with more trophies, mostly hands and feet from our enemies.

Niccolo paused when I stepped in. “They aren’t happy with the place you suggested.”

“Their happiness is no requirement.”

“Indeed.” Niccolo shrugged. “They eventually agreed after a few more threats to remove parts of the boy. The meeting will take place at midnight in Terminal 24 as you ordered.”

“Good. The perfect place for a spectacle.”

Niccolo leaned against the mantel and crossed his arms. “Will you enlighten me about your plans, or will I be surprised like Corvin?”

I chuckled. Niccolo’s bursts of annoyance toward me used to make me angry. Now I enjoyed his acts of defiance. Fear and deference weren’t as much fun with the people I wanted in my life. “I need you to tell Sasha to prepare the trailers and calculate how much sedative we need to subdue the chimps for two hours.”

Niccolo’s face slackened with shock. He shoved away from the chimney piece. “You want to use the chimps?”

“I do. They’ve become an unpredictable risk, and it’s only a matter of time before we have to let them go. That way, they can have some fun as a last hurrah.”

“Fuck,” Niccolo said, his face twisting with a mix of horror and admiration. “You really want to make Corvin pay.”

“I do, and he will.”

“You know we can’t control those chimps even when drugged, so they might very well attack us, and I’d really hate to have my balls ripped off by a one-hundred-and-eighty-pound chimp.”

“The female could just as easily rip them off. Don’t underestimate her.”

“I don’t, trust me. I’ve seen what they did to poor Jorge. That guy was unrecognizable when we got him out.”

I nodded. “Everything will go according to the plan. Chaos will be on our side.”

“I really hope you’re right. I doubt Amelia will be happy if she finds out chimps ripped apart the boy.”

“I’ll make sure he’s safe.”

“Maybe then he actually stands a chance.” He let out a string of laughter, shaking his head as he brought his phone to his ear. “Hey, Sasha. We need you…”

I gave Niccolo a few more instructions before I left him to his task of coordinating everything.

I had somewhere else I needed to be. I had lost count of the times I’d descended the stairs toward the basement. My heart still sped up when I entered the dank, dark basement. I wondered if that would ever change.

Achille cowered on his cot in the last cell and made himself even smaller as I approached him.

“Your nephew Corvin wants to get you out of here.”

Achille lifted his head, suspicion and hope battling on his deformed face. “Corvin is a wimp and a fool. Do you really think I believe that?”

I grinned. “Well, he seems to think he can blackmail you out of here with your own son, Luciano.”

Achille sat up, suddenly perky. “He kidnapped the boy?”

“Your son. Indeed. I don’t suppose you would put down your life for your child?”

His lips twisted. “I’d kill the kid myself to punish that whore Flavia.”

“That’s what I thought, which is why I devised a plan to save the boy without your cooperation. Your deranged chimps will help, though.”

“Do you think they’ll save the boy for you?” He cackled.

I raised my brows. “I’m not a ringmaster, Achille. I only let nature run its course.”

His puzzlement quickly morphed to realization. “You’re going to let the chimps kill him? They’ll kill the boy, too.”

“No, they won’t. I’ll protect him.”

“You think you’re a hero, Nestore? What you truly are shows down here. You’re a beast, a monster.”

I reached for the lock, noting Achille’s violent flinching. A wave of grim satisfaction ripped through me.

I turned on my heel. I didn’t have time to torture him. If I stayed, I’d lose myself in the rage like I so often did. His terror had to be enough for today.

Niccolo, Sasha, and I sat in the front of the truck that pulled the transporter with the knocked-out chimps. Niccolo drummed a nervous rhythm on his legs and kept throwing wary glances backward as if he thought the chimps would spring on us any moment.

“They can’t break through the transporter,” I said. I was calm, my pulse beating steadily.

Niccolo scoffed. “That’s why we’re stupid enough to release them later.”

I shrugged. Sasha, too, looked a little ashen. Maybe death simply didn’t scare me enough. Even the prospect of being torn to shreds by one of the chimps hardly made my heart race. The Port of Los Angeles buzzed with activity even at this time of the night. The other terminals were brightly illuminated as massive cranes loaded and unloaded container ships that towered several stories over us. Workers in orange vests hurried along as crew members of the container ships took a smoke on board. Honks from arriving ships filled the night.

Containers were stacked up on our left as we headed straight for Terminal 24, which had been closed for construction for three weeks. As expected, only a couple of lights illuminated the waterfront, but the area near the warehouses lay in the dark. The bustle from the other terminals was gone. Nobody worked here until the construction crews returned in the morning.

Sasha pulled up the truck beside the warehouse, then shut off the engine. It was five minutes before midnight. There was no sign of Corvin yet.

A scratching noise in the back made Sasha and Niccolo tense. We listened for further sounds, but silence reigned in the transporter. With wild animals, using sedatives was always a risk. We’d learned that the hard way when we’d moved the chimps to their new enclosure. The adrenaline spike in the male chimp had turned him into a raging wrecking ball out for blood for nearly an hour.

“Are you sure they’re knocked out for twenty more minutes?” Niccolo asked doubtfully.

Sasha ran a hand over his blond stubble, a dark frown pulling his brows down. He was half Russian, half Italian, but had been a loyal asset since I’d become Underboss. “It should work, but these chimps are unpredictable.”

Niccolo scoffed and shoved his fingers into his curly hair. “Fuck.”

I scanned the area for signs of another car. Time trickled by, and when we reached five minutes past midnight, the nervous energy in our truck was almost palpable. My own calm slowly disappeared. It wasn’t replaced by nerves or anxiety, only by rage over being made to wait.

“What if they don’t come?” Niccolo asked.

“They’ll come. They want to show us they’re the boss because we pissed them off by choosing the meeting place.”

“Fuck, I hope you’re right.”

Headlights illuminated the warehouse when a black limousine turned the corner and parked with its headlights facing our way, but at least one hundred yards away.

“Showtime,” I said as I pushed open the door and got out without hesitation. I turned toward the other car and opened my fur coat so they could see I didn’t carry any weapons.

“Pull up your legs!” someone shouted as the door opened.

I bent down and lifted my pants legs. I didn’t have any weapons on me, having expected this, and I wouldn’t need them. I’d kill them with my bare hands and teeth if I had to, but I counted on the chimps to do the job for me. Behind me, Niccolo got out of the car, probably to watch my back.

“Where’s my uncle?” Corvin shouted, still half hidden behind the door of the car. I hadn’t seen him since my fifteenth birthday party, and time hadn’t done him any favors. He was half bald and, from what I could see, not in the shape of his life.

I tossed my head back. “In the transporter. Where’s the boy?”

Corvin motioned to someone in the car, and another older man got out, holding a small child by a leash attached to a collar around the child’s throat. The kid stared unblinkingly ahead, in shock. What had these assholes done to him? From a distance, it was difficult to make out if he bore any resemblance to Achille or Flavia. I wouldn’t put it past Corvin to use another boy to trick me.

Their punishment would be worthy of their crime.

Corvin motioned at the area between our cars. “Bring my uncle forward. We’ll meet in the middle and do the exchange. I won’t go near that transporter. I don’t trust you, crazy bastard.”

I gave Niccolo a nod, who released a sigh and headed to the back of the transporter with Sasha. A couple of minutes later, they came forward with a cuffed and blindfolded prisoner. They hadn’t closed the flap of the transporter again.

The prisoner wasn’t Lamorgese. It was a Bratva asshole who’d sustained burn wounds during his attempt to ignite one of our drug labs in central LA. Sasha and Niccolo had cut off his calf a few hours ago to make

him look more like Achille, and the burn scars on his face prevented anyone from seeing who he really was anyway. I grabbed his arm, and he let out a muffled cry. The fabric stuffed into his mouth stopped him from spewing anything in Russian that would give him away and ruin my plan.

Niccolo's jaw ticked with tension.

"Stick to the plan," I reminded him. I didn't need him to protect me. I could handle these weaklings and a few enraged chimps.

He nodded. I dragged the prisoner forward just when Corvin did the same with the small boy, who stumbled and fell as he couldn't keep up with him. The second man followed closely. I didn't mind.

Corvin tugged hard at the leash. "Get up!"

The boy struggled to his feet, then stumbled after Corvin, who was practically choking him with the collar to get him to move faster. Corvin definitely was his uncle's blood. I'd enjoy his screams. The second man gave me a triumphant smile as he thought they'd won this round.

I bared my teeth, causing his smile to drop.

When we finally arrived in the middle, I narrowed my eyes on Corvin. His widened eyes were directed at the bone crown on my head. "You always struck me as a man who likes to torture little kids to feel powerful."

"Careful," Corvin snarled, dragging Luciano to his side. The child's face was turning increasingly red.

I shoved the prisoner to the ground. "Here's your uncle. I'm not sure he's worth the bother."

"Check if it's him," Corvin told the other man, his hold on the leash tightening further. I could hear a familiar deep grunt coming from the transporter. Corvin looked around but obviously couldn't place the noise. His bad.

I trained my ears on the noises coming from the back to know when I'd have to be quick.

The older man stepped toward the Russian prisoner curled up on the ground, while Corvin's eyes were once again drawn to the bone crown on top of my head. "You like it? Your uncle contributed to it. I'd really love to add your fingers too."

His expression fell with horror, then it hardened.

The older man bent over the prisoner on the ground, gripping the cloth in his mouth. Low grunts and pants came from behind me. Not much time

now.

Corvin stiffened as he looked behind me toward the transporter. “What is in there?” The older man ripped the cloth out of the mouth of my Bratva prisoner, and a string of Russian curses fell from the guy’s lips.

“Your uncle’s sanity,” I said with a wide grin.

I reached for my crown and jerked the bone knife hidden among the other bones free, then kicked the older man’s head as hard as I could and hurled the knife at Corvin’s shoulder. His face lit up with agony, his eyes going wide, and he released the leash. I stormed forward, tugged my fur coat off, and thrust it over the boy so he wouldn’t witness more before I ripped the knife from Corvin’s shoulder. It was my favorite weapon, so I wouldn’t give it up.

High-pitched shrieks and guttural grunts ripped through the night. That was an angry male chimp. No time to lose.

Corvin let out a gasp, his shock-widened eyes focusing on something behind me.

I didn’t look back. It wouldn’t do me any favors. I knew exactly what an enraged chimp out for blood looked like. I picked up the boy wrapped in the coat, then sliced my blade along the hollows of Corvin’s knees, making his legs buckle. He fell forward and landed on his palms, but his terror-stricken face was directed at the chimp.

I began walking toward the car that had taken Corvin and his men here. I wouldn’t have the time to run to my own car without crossing the chimps, and that wouldn’t be a good idea. But if I started running, I’d turn into the prey.

The shrieks and howls escalated, followed by an agonized scream from Corvin. The driver of the black limousine hit the gas. My heart stopped. Fuck. I needed a place to hide from the chimps. A shot rang out, ripping a hole into the front window of the car, and it jerked to a stop. I quickened my steps but didn’t start running so as not to attract the attention of the chimps. I only heard the deep male chimp’s grunts and Corvin’s pained screams, followed by the sound of ripping flesh and breaking bones. The boy in my hold didn’t move. He might as well not have been there at all.

When I reached the car, I ripped open the back door and put the boy down on the back seat, then closed the door before I opened the driver’s door. A clean head shot had killed the driver. He hung limply in the seat,

blood trickling down one side of his face. I dragged him out and tossed him to the ground, then took the position behind the steering wheel. Sirens sounded in the distance. The chimps' screams escalated as if spurred on by the other sound.

When the door was closed, I risked a look at the scene before me. The enraged male chimp sank his long, razor-sharp teeth into Corvin's body, ripping flesh out. Corvin wasn't moving anymore. Considering the state of his body—he was missing an arm, part of his face, and several big chunks in his torso and pelvis—I wasn't surprised. The older man woke up at that moment and let out a scream in shock. His last mistake. The male chimp jumped on him, baring his canines, and ripped his arm off. These animals made it look so very easy, but it was close to impossible for a human to rip off a damn finger. I had tried multiple times.

I put the car in reverse and hit the gas.

The female chimp emerged from the truck and rushed toward her partner. Together, they turned their attention to the Russian prisoner. I steered the car away from the scene and Terminal 24. In the distance, the roof lights of police cars lit up the harbor area. Sasha rushed out and closed the back door of the transporter then rushed back to the driver's side. He and Niccolo drove ahead, and I followed closely. We needed to be gone before the police arrived at the scene. It would be a hassle to bribe and blackmail all the necessary people. I didn't have time for that shit tonight.

I picked up my phone and called Amelia. She'd be waiting for news from me. She picked up after the first ring. "Nestore?" Her voice shook with fear. It stirred something in my chest that I never felt with anyone else—the desire to protect her at all costs.

"I have the boy. We're coming home now."

"Oh, thank God."

"Trust me, he wasn't involved in this." God had forsaken me a long time ago. I couldn't even blame him.

"How is Luciano? Is he injured?"

"I haven't had a chance to examine him yet. We were pressed for time." Hearing Amelia's shuddering intake of breath, I added, "But on first glance, I didn't see any obvious injuries. He's traumatized, though."

"Of course he is," she whispered. "Thank you. I'll wait for you."

I hung up and focused on the street. It was fairly crowded for this time of night, even by LA standards. I turned on the radio, where a local radio station issued a warning to stay away from the Port area due to a chimp attack. I turned it off again. A small sob sounded in the back of the car.

“You’re safe now,” I said. “I’m taking you to your sister, Amelia.”

His sobs quieted, and he stopped breathing. I glanced over my shoulder, but only his nose peeked out between the fur. What he’d experienced would leave scars, but at least he’d been spared a worse fate. “No need to stop breathing. I already know you’re there. I put you in the back seat myself.”

I focused back on the street when the boy sucked in a shaky breath.

I felt strangely at peace that I had saved this boy. It almost felt as if I had saved a very tiny part of myself, too.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

I felt almost sick with nerves when an unfamiliar black limousine pulled up in the driveway of the mansion. The hole in the front window from a bullet only increased my anxiety. My imagination had run wild in the past few hours. I would have never forgiven myself if Luciano had died because I couldn't convince Nestore to exchange my father. And what if something happened to Nestore? Maybe his soldiers considered him invincible, almost inhuman, but I knew he wasn't, and the thought of losing him forever… I didn't allow myself to finish that thought.

I rushed outside but froze on the staircase when the door opened. Nestore emerged bare-chested, the disturbing bone knife tucked into his belt, and his bone crown atop his head. Relief washed over me. He was back.

I could only imagine what Corvin and the others felt when they saw Nestore. He was an unsettling sight. I hoped he'd made them suffer, but knowing him, I didn't have a doubt. The blood covering the blade only affirmed my hopes.

Nestore briefly gazed up to me, his expression hard and focused, before he turned to the back and opened the door. He bent down and straightened with his fur coat pressed to his chest.

I stumbled down the stairs. “Where’s Luciano?” What if Nestore had lied? What if my brother had died and he wanted to tell me the bad news in person?

My vision turned black at the edges as my heart pounded in my chest, an erratic rhythm that almost made me pass out.

“Here,” Nestore said calmly as he moved toward me. That was when I noticed a small nose peeking out between the fur.

“Is he okay?” I rushed toward him, then hesitated. What if he were seriously injured?

“I covered him in my coat so he wouldn’t see what was going on.”

I reached for the soft fur, then peeled it away until Luciano’s pale, tear-streaked face came into view. His eyes were squeezed shut, and he had a bruise on his cheek that was turning a dark purple. My heart clenched when I saw the leather collar around his neck and the leash attached to it. “I hope they suffered,” I whispered.

“The chimps had fun.”

My eyes grew wide with realization, then I gave a small appreciative nod. I touched Luciano’s unblemished cheek. “Luciano, it’s me, Amelia. You’re safe now. I’ll take care of you.”

His eyelids peeled up, and he looked up at me with bloodshot, glassy blue eyes. His face scrunched up, and he reached for me. I picked him up, careful not to tug on the leash or collar.

He pressed against me, his tiny arms practically crushing my neck as he sobbed against my shoulder.

Tears sprang into my eyes as I held him tightly. “Can you?” I nodded toward the leash. Nestore reached for the collar, and Luciano stiffened.

“It’s okay. Nestore will free you of that thing around your throat.”

When the collar finally came off, his bruised neck became visible. His skin was red and scraped. I kissed the top of his head. “Where’s Mommy?”

I sent Nestore a helpless look.

“She’s on a private jet on her way here. She’ll arrive in about two hours.”

“Did you hear? Your mommy will be here soon. Until then, let’s get you inside and clean you up.” The stench of urine and feces told me nobody had bothered to help Luciano when he needed to relieve himself. He still needed diapers, so of course, he’d sullied himself.

I carried Luciano inside, followed closely by Nestore, who only stopped when another car pulled up, and Niccolo got out.

“Go ahead,” Nestore murmured. “I’ll check on you later.”

When I arrived in one of the guest bedrooms, I ran a warm bath and helped Luciano out of his clothes, spotting more bruises on his upper arms and his back. My rage burned through me, and I half wished Nestore had captured the men who’d hurt Luciano and locked them in his basement. Even if death by chimps probably was horrific, a slow end by Nestore’s hands would have been even more deserved.

These vengeful thoughts stunned me, so I focused on Luciano and lifted him into the bathtub. He clung to my hand as if he feared I’d leave him alone. “I’ll stay, okay?”

He gave a small nod and sank into the bubbles with a shaky sob.

I grabbed a washcloth from the small rack next to the tub and began to wipe Luciano’s back and face with it. Ten minutes later, he was clean and a little less tense. I dried him off and carried him back into the bedroom from where I heard steps. I froze when I spotted the young maid, Milly. She held a package with diapers, wipes, and fresh clothes.

She put everything down on the sideboard beside the door. “Master ordered us to get this for the boy before he left.”

I smiled. Nestore had been sure he’d return with Luciano, and he’d thought of everything. Maybe my Nestore was in there after all. “Thank you. Can you bring us some food?”

“What does he like?”

Luciano clung to me, his face pressed into the towel as if he feared Milly would hurt him. “He loves spaghetti carbonara.”

Milly nodded. “It’ll be up in fifteen minutes.”

She hurried out and closed the door. I put Luciano on the bed. He let out a wide yawn. I stepped back to grab clothes and a diaper from the sideboard, but again his tiny hand stopped me. Fear filled his face as he peered up at me. “I’m just going to walk right over there to grab some stuff, okay?”

He released me, but he kept his eyes on me as I crossed the room to grab everything I needed to get him ready for bed. The staff had bought two sets of pajamas with fire trucks and helicopters, cozy socks, several shirts, pants, and onesies. I picked the fire truck pj's because Luciano was obsessed with the fire brigade. When I returned to him, his face slackened with relief. "Can you lie down so I can put a diaper on?"

He lay back immediately. Last time I'd seen him, he'd been in his "no" phase and always thrown a tantrum when we'd tried to change his diaper. I really hoped the kidnapping hadn't broken his spirit. I'd rather bear his terrible twos than this silent obedience. He was sore from being in his soiled clothes, so I put some rash cream on his skin before I slipped the diaper on. "Look what I have for you." When I showed him the pj's, his face lit up, giving me some hope. Once he was dressed, I snuggled up against him in the bed and stroked his brown hair.

A knock sounded. Luciano stiffened and pressed himself against me with a small whimper. My chest clenched.

"It's the food," I said softly, then louder, "Come in!"

The door swung open, and Milly entered with a tray. She put it down on the nightstand beside me. Spaghetti carbonara piled high on two plates, and next to it, two chocolate muffins waited to be devoured. "There's warm milk with honey in the cup for a good night's sleep," she said, then backed away and left.

"Look at that," I said. Luciano scanned the food and gave a small smile.

"When was the last time you've eaten?"

He shrugged.

"Do you want me to feed you?"

He nodded.

"Please sit up."

He struggled into a sitting position, and I pushed a cozy cushion into his back for support. After pressing a kiss to the top of his head, I grabbed a plate and blew on the pasta for a while. It was too hot. Luciano watched the food with big, greedy eyes. I carefully tested a bite against my lower lip, then began to feed him the spaghetti. He ate the entire portion, then looked hungrily at the muffin.

"A sweet treat?"

He bobbed his head, his eyes fixed on the muffin. I handed it to him. He ate it eagerly, leaving crumbs all over himself and the bed, something I would have admonished under normal circumstances, but I was just happy to see him hungry and well. Keeping my eyes on him, I devoured my spaghetti. I hadn't eaten anything since I'd found out he'd been kidnapped and was starving. Soon, Luciano's lips and his cheeks were covered in chocolate, but he looked so content that it warmed my heart. I put away my plate and nodded toward my muffin. "You can have mine too, if you like?"

He gnawed on his lower lip, considering it, then he shook his head. "Milk?"

I smiled and handed him the cup with warm milk. He sipped it while I took a wipe and carefully cleaned his fingers, then his face. When he had downed the entire cup, he lay down. I stretched out beside him and wrapped my arms around him.

"Your mommy will be here soon." I glanced at the clock. If she landed in an hour, she could be here in ninety minutes if things went really well. Not that Luciano had a concept of time yet.

Luciano nodded, but his breathing slowed, and his tiny fingers dug into my shirt. When I peered down, his eyes were closed and his mouth slack. He had fallen asleep. I pressed a kiss to his forehead but stayed where I was. If he woke from a nightmare, I wanted to be there to console him. I'd lost count of the times I'd woken from a bad dream without someone to assure me I was safe.

My own eyes began to droop when a soft knock sounded. The door opened without a word from me, so I knew it could only be Nestore. I peered toward the door. He stood in the doorway and regarded me with a pensive expression. He had gotten rid of the bone crown and bone knife and wore clean black pants and combat boots.

"I'm leaving for the airport now," he said quietly.

"Flavia will be upset. Don't be too hard on her."

Nestore's brows snatched together. "I saved her son, and I'll let her live in a splendid townhouse near you. She'll be safe, and money won't be an issue. I don't see how that constitutes being hard on someone."

I smiled at him. "I just mean…" I sighed. "Try to be… kind."

Nestore raised his brows. "That's something I'm not very good at."

"Sometimes you are kind to me."

He tilted his head, the tendons in his hand holding the doorknob tensed. “You are the exception to everything.”

I swallowed at the look of adoration in his eyes, which quickly morphed to anger.

He turned and left, closing the door almost noiselessly.

Luciano stirred but didn’t wake. I stared for a while at the spot where Nestore had been, then lay my head back down on the pillow and closed my eyes. I didn’t turn the lights off. In the beginning, after I escaped from the basement, I had preferred to wake to a brightly lit room, and sometimes I still did.

Niccolo slanted me a searching look when I sank into the passenger seat with a deep breath. It wasn’t exhaustion that made me long for bed. But having seen Amelia hold the little boy, I had wished to feel her body against mine. Nothing calmed me like her presence. Hardly anything managed to rile me up like she did either.

“The police shot the male chimp when he attacked their cars, and the female chimp drowned when she tried to attack a Coast Guard boat,” Niccolo said as he steered the car away from the mansion.

I nodded. I hadn’t expected the chimps to survive. They had suffered in captivity, but they had been too traumatized for a life anywhere else. At least, now they had peace and got some revenge on humans before they moved on to the afterlife. “Any survivors?”

Niccolo scoffed. “The three bodies were nearly unrecognizable when the police recovered them. The chimps ate their faces off and ripped them apart.”

I smirked. That was the outcome I had hoped for.

“They’ll link it to us. They always know the craziest shit comes from us.”

“They won’t do anything about it.”

Niccolo huffed. “Remo will have some questions for you.”

“He wants me to spread fear, to act worthy of the name Madman, and I do. He’ll be happy I got rid of our enemies.”

“He won’t be happy we can’t question them anymore.”

I shrugged. “It got out of hand. He knows me.”

“Yeah, and I’m still surprised he never punishes you. You’re like his favorite pet.”

I narrowed my eyes at him.

“You know what I mean.”

“I’ll simply pretend you didn’t compare me to a pet.”

Niccolo sighed. “He’ll know you did it for her.”

My hands curled into a fist. “I did it for her, but I also contained a threat to the Camorra. Remo will be pleased.”

“Everyone sees you’re different with her. Don’t you worry that Remo will think she’s too powerful?”

“Remo and I talked about Amelia, and he’s decided to accept my bond with her.”

Niccolo scoffed. “I told you, you’re his favorite pet.”

“And you’re mine. That’s why you still live despite all the enraging things you say.”

Niccolo snapped his mouth shut and locked his jaw. At least he finally shut up.

When we pulled onto the airstrip of the small private airport, the private jet was already parked there, but the doors were still closed. I got out when the door opened. A tall bodyguard scanned the area and gave me a nod before he began his descent, followed by Flavia Lamorgese. I didn’t know what name she had picked as an alias, and it didn’t matter. She couldn’t run from her last name, nor could Luciano. Their blood determined their future. They were as inevitably bound to the Camorra as I was.

Flavia leveled her terrified eyes on me. She didn't know about the fate of her boy yet, only that the exchange had happened a few hours ago. She didn't wear makeup and wore her hair in a short bob, very unlike the woman I remembered. Her thick coat and boots were better suited to the weather in Minneapolis than in Los Angeles. Maybe she still thought she'd return to her apartment. I had already told my men to start moving her few belongings from the place, and they had packed them into two small bags inside the jet.

When the bodyguard moved aside, Flavia rushed toward me, her face twisting with despair. She stumbled against me, her fingers grabbing my fur coat. "Is he safe?" Her eyes brimmed with tears.

I removed her grip from my clothes, not fond of her closeness. "He is in Romano Manor with Amelia. He's physically unharmed except for a few scratches and bruises. I can't attest to his emotional state, though."

She let out a high-pitched sob and threw her arms around me. "Thank you."

I stiffened. My pulse spiked, and the need to lash out brutally rose in me, but I simply gripped her wrists and pushed her away. Niccolo wrapped an arm around her and pulled her away. "Let's get you into the car so you can get to your son."

He slanted me a cautious look, and I gave him a grateful nod. The sound of a jet taking off from another airstrip made Flavia jump, as if someone were about to attack us.

Niccolo steered her toward the back door.

I sat down in the front with Flavia in the back seat. On our way to the manor, I fixed her with a hard look in the rearview mirror. "You won't be returning to Minneapolis, and you won't leave Los Angeles without my permission ever again."

She swallowed but gave a terse nod. She looked like she would have agreed to anything at that moment. It usually took hours of torture to get people to this point, but I supposed she would have gladly suffered torture to save her son.

"You and your son have a target on your heads, even if you change your name or pretend you're a bartending single mom. This poses a threat to the Camorra and Amelia's happiness, which is why I can't allow it."

She tilted her head with a puzzled look. "How's Amelia?"

“You can ask her yourself,” I clipped. “I expect you to move into the house I pick and accept the bodyguards I send you. You won’t work unless it’s something I approve, and you’ll get the money you need to live a luxurious life.”

“I don’t have to move back into the manor?”

“No, it’s Amelia’s and my home.”

She smiled in a way that suggested she wasn’t happy at all. “I doubt Amelia sees it as that. She despises that place as much as I do.”

I gritted my teeth. “Your opinion on the matter is of no importance.”

She pressed her lips together and leaned her head against the window, wrapping her arms around herself. “Just tell me that you made them suffer.”

“Your husband’s chimps ripped them apart,” I said.

Her eyes grew wide, then a small smile played across her face. “Good. Those beasts terrified me. I know these men had horrible last moments. I wish I could have seen it.”

“There’s footage of their ripped-apart bodies on almost every news station. Search the internet,” Niccolo said.

Flavia smiled. “I’d like to see it later.”

Niccolo raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t expect you to take me up on the offer.”

“I was Achille’s wife.”

Flavia and I exchanged a look. She, too, had suffered under Achille Lamorgese’s hand, which was why I didn’t dislike her as much as I should for helping Amelia hide from me.

“You are his wife,” I reminded her. “He’s still alive.”

Her face fell, eyes lighting up with dread.

“He’s as good as dead, and not even a sliver of the man he used to be. I can declare him dead if you want to be free of him officially.”

“Yes, that’s what I’d prefer,” she pressed out. Her eyes searched mine as if she hoped to find an answer in them. “Amelia wants him gone.”

I looked away before my rage could make me lose control. Flavia didn’t say anything else. Maybe she realized the danger she was in.

After we arrived at the mansion, Niccolo and I led Flavia toward the guest bedroom. He probably wanted to make sure she didn’t touch me again.

I knocked, then opened the door. The room was still brightly lit as it had been when I'd left. Amelia lifted her head, her eyes heavy with sleep. The moment she spotted Flavia, her face crumpled, and she started crying. Flavia rushed in and hugged Amelia, then lay down beside her sleeping son and kissed his entire face.

Amelia gave me a quick smile before she looked back at Flavia. She probably wouldn't join me in bed tonight.

I closed the door.

"That's the family reunion I would have loved to have," Niccolo said with a chuckle.

I frowned at my cousin. "When I first saw you, I wasn't sure if you had betrayed me. Count yourself lucky I didn't kill you."

Niccolo sighed. "All right, all right. I guess you not killing me is good enough then. Get some sleep. You look like death warmed over."

He turned and left.

I leaned against the door. Returning to our empty bedroom didn't sound enticing at all. There was no way I would find any sleep without Amelia beside me.

Pushing away from the door, I headed into the basement instead. Lamorgese needed to hear the good news of his nephew's brutal death.

Lamorgese jerked away when I reached his cell. He struggled into a sitting position on his cot and eyed me fearfully. His patchy beard was matted in places, and strands of unwashed hair stuck to his forehead.

"Your pet chimps ripped apart your nephews and his accomplices."

He didn't say anything. "I hope the boy died too, so my whorish ex-wife suffers the rest of her life."

I cocked an eyebrow at his cruel words. Not that I had expected anything less from a man like him. "The boy's your son too, but I reckon that doesn't mean much to you. You only love yourself, don't you?" I leaned one shoulder against the bars and crossed my arms over my bare chest.

"Don't talk about love as if you know what it is."

I moved my hand toward the lock, causing Lamorgese to fall silent and wince. Smirking, I dropped my hand. "Your son is fine, and so is your wife. She sleeps upstairs in one of our guest bedrooms and was happy to hear that you are suffering."

“One day, all of you will die.”

“True, that’s the usual course of events, but I assure you, you’ll be long dead by then.”

“Will I? When are you ever going to kill me?” The tremor of longing in his voice brought a smile to my face. I, too, had experienced moments when I longed for death while in Achille’s hands, and it was gratifying now that the tables had turned.

“You haven’t begged me enough for death. Maybe next time I spend some quality time with you, you’ll give it another try.”

I turned on my heel and left.

“She doesn’t love you, you know? You’re too monstrous to love.”

I faltered in my steps but then continued up the stairwell. Even after all this time, even when I held the power over life and death in my hands, Achille Lamorgese still managed to wound me with words. No matter how much he cried and begged when I tortured him, he always managed to remind me of the boy who’d been helpless.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

It was so good to see Flavia again. She looked pale, and her cheeks were tearstained, but her face was alight with relief and love while she stroked Luciano's hair. He was still fast asleep, but when he woke, he'd be ecstatic to see his mom.

"How are you?" Flavia whispered as she scanned my face.

"Fine, now that Luciano is safe."

She smiled briefly before her expression became serious again. "I'm talking about you and Nestore. He kidnapped you, and you're his wife, right?" She glanced at the ring on my finger.

"Yes, we married. I wish you could have been there."

"For the happiest day of your life?" Flavia said bitterly.

I shrugged. "I never stopped thinking about Nestore. I don't think I could have ever moved on."

"One day you would have, but he kidnapped you and forced you to marry him."

"It's okay. Don't worry about me. You and Luciano have to rebuild your life here."

Flavia's lips thinned. "I don't like it, but at the same time, I'm glad for the extra protection. I won't survive if something happens to Luciano."

I put my hand on hers. "Nothing will happen to him. Nestore will protect him."

Flavia tilted her head. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you love him."

My chest tightened. "I think I do. Not his monstrous side, but the rest." Something deep inside me protested, a dark whisper that scared me. "*Both. I love both sides."*

"Is there a rest?"

I swallowed hard. "He saved Luciano, and he can be kind to me."

Flavia shook her head, then worry overcame her face. "Is he like your father?"

I bristled at the comparison, even if I understood her reasoning. She hadn't been with Nestore in the basement. She hadn't witnessed his suffering and his rebirth. "He's not, not to me."

Nestore fought an internal battle when it came to me. Maybe part of him wished he could treat me like everyone else, but that part would never win, and he knew it.

Luciano let out whimpers and began to thrash.

"Sweetheart, Mommy is here," Flavia crooned as she wrapped him into a tight embrace and kissed his swollen cheek. "You're safe."

His eyes flew open, and he rolled over and curled up against her. His whimpers turned to heart-wrenching wails as he clung to his mother.

I sat up, feeling torn between the happiness of seeing them reunited and utter sadness over his terror.

Flavia reached for me. "Don't leave."

I glanced at the door, then I lay back down even though I worried that Nestore would be waiting for me to join him. He would survive one night without me.

"I'll stay."

Flavia and Luciano were still fast asleep when I snuck out of the room around eight in the morning. When I entered the primary bedroom, the bed was untouched. I moved into the bathroom, but didn't find Nestore there either. I stepped into the shower to wake myself fully before I went in search of him. The warm water felt good on my body as I soaped myself up.

A cry ripped from my throat when I noticed a dark figure from the corner of my eye before I realized it was Nestore. He was barefoot, only dressed in low pajama pants and his fur coat. Had he been outside?

I turned the water off and opened the glass door. "You scared me."

Nestore's hungry gaze raked over my naked body, making my nipples pebble and my core tighten with need. After the adrenaline and anxiety rush of yesterday, I needed an outlet for all the pent-up emotions.

Nestore's expression promised he knew how.

He stalked toward me when I wanted to grab the towel and took it away. He raked his fingers into my hair, then tipped my head back and kissed me deeply. "I'll lick every drop of water off your body."

I shivered at the raw need in his voice.

His lips descended on my throat, and his tongue darted out, lapping at the droplets gathering there. His tongue followed more droplets down to my breasts, licking up the water before he chased more drops down to my navel. I giggled when he dipped his tongue in. His fingers clasped my hips and turned me around so I had no choice but to press my palms against the glass to catch my balance. His tongue caressed my tailbone, then higher, making me shiver with need. The wetness gathering between my legs had nothing to do with my shower.

His tongue followed a rivulet from my wet hair down to my tailbone, then along the crease between my ass cheeks. I gasped and arched my back.

He turned me back around so I faced him and licked a hot trail along my pussy. I trembled as my clit throbbed with need. "That's not water I taste," he rasped before he took another lick.

I sank my teeth into my lower lip and leaned back against the shower, parting my legs for better access. Nestore surprised me by pushing to his feet and cupping my cheeks. His lips crashed down on mine for a deep kiss that left me breathless. His palm cupped my pussy, and he dipped one finger into me, making me moan. "Wet for me."

I nodded. How could I deny that my body craved his sinful touch?

His eyes seemed to darken. “I want to submit to you, to show you who holds the power, but on days like yesterday, I realize you’re the powerful one. And it makes me so very angry.”

I frowned, not sure where he was going with this. All I knew was that I needed his touch.

“Kneel on the bed. I want to prove to myself that you’re worth it.”

“Are you in doubt?”

He smiled darkly. “Kneel.”

“I should dry myself.”

“You’ll wet the bed with your release. Don’t bother.”

I blinked, my core tightening at the prospect of pleasure. I backed away as Nestore stalked me like a predator. With a thick swallow, I turned around and climbed onto the bed on all fours.

“Get down on your elbows and part your legs.”

I did as he ordered, even as my pulse picked up at the exposed position. Steps came closer, and I caught sight of his pant legs.

Nestore’s lips brushed my ass, then he parted my cheeks and pushed his tongue into my back opening. I exhaled as his tongue pushed in deeper while his fingers massaged my cheeks, nails scratching over the skin. He slid his tongue out, and I mourned a touch I never knew I’d like. His tongue swirled over my asshole, circling the tight muscle over and over. Only Nestore’s raspy breathing and my soft pants filled the darkness around us. I sank my fingers into the mattress, marveling how I could feel every stroke of his tongue on my ass in my pounding clit.

Wetness trickled out of me and soaked the linens under me. Nestore began to suck on my back entrance, making me mewl, and my eyes rolled back. A finger parted my pussy lips, testing how wet I was. I prayed for his touch on my aching clit, but he pulled back, resuming his ministrations to my butt.

“Nestore,” I pleaded.

“Be silent, Amelia. This is your punishment. I don’t want to hear another word from you, or I’ll leave you chained to the bed so you can’t find relief by your own hands. You will follow my command.”

Punishment for what? Not that I cared if this was Nestore’s understanding of punishing me. His tongue returned to its teasing of my tight hole. I dug my fingers into the bedsheets. “Soon,” Nestore rasped, “I’ll

claim another first.” Before I could ask him what he meant, he pushed his tongue into my back entrance.

“Oh,” I breathed out, my fingers sinking deeper into the sheets until my knuckles ached from the pressure. Nestore began to fuck me with his tongue while his fingers opened me wide for better access.

This felt so depraved and almost wrong, but no part of me wanted him to stop.

“I need—” I gasped, my eyes flying open when Nestore moved his tongue inside me.

“I decide what you need and when you’ll get it.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. My clit screamed for touch. I shifted my weight and reached down between my legs, but one of Nestore’s hands snatched my wrist.

“No,” he growled. With a whimper, I returned my hand to the bed. Nestore resumed his teasing of my back entrance, and I tried to be patient, hoping I’d be rewarded if I behaved. “Turn around and lie down on your back.”

I rolled over, hoping this meant he’d finally fuck me. I was soaked and wanted nothing more than to feel Nestore’s cock in my pussy. But he didn’t get out of his pants despite the huge bulge tenting them.

Instead, he gripped my ankles and pushed my legs all the way back until my feet rested beside my ears. “I love how flexible you are,” he murmured, his eyes darkening with hunger as he regarded my exposed state.

Years of private ballet lessons to improve my posture were the reason for my flexibility despite not having trained in years. Nestore locked gazes with me, gripped my ass, and bent low. He extended his tongue and slowly pushed it into my back entrance.

“Nestore,” I moaned. The sight of Nestore’s tongue entering me almost tipped me over the edge. He kept his eyes on me as he slid back and forth, and then finally, he slid his pointer and middle finger over my pussy lips and pushed them into my opening very slowly.

I arched off the bed at the friction in both my channels. He found a rhythm with his fingers and tongue that had me mewling and panting. I rocked my hips, needing more yet aware that begging wouldn’t get me what I needed.

Without warning, he pulled away and straightened. I remained as I was, completely overwhelmed and desperate for release.

He shoved down his pants and kicked them away. His cock was rock hard and covered in precum. “Fuck, I’m desperate to sink my cock into your ass, but I have other plans for this last first of yours.”

He positioned the head of his cock at my pussy and slammed in with one hard stroke. I cried out at the feeling of utter fullness. He was so much deeper than before. My walls tried to handle the sudden intrusion, but Nestore didn’t give them time to adjust. He dropped to his palms beside my head and feet and began to pound into me.

My eyes rolled back after a few deep thrusts, and pleasure coursed through me with blinding intensity. My channel spasmed under wave after wave of pleasure. I screamed out my release, unable to keep the sounds in. Nestore’s face twisted with concentration as he drilled into me over and over again until I felt a new orgasm building. I wasn’t sure if I could take much more. “Too much,” I gasped.

“You take what I give you,” he growled and slammed even harder into me as one of his hands cupped my breast and twisted my nipple. Stars erupted in my vision, and I clenched around his cock, causing him to growl low in his throat. He shuddered, and I felt his release spill into me as the waves of my second orgasm crashed over me. He pumped into me in jerky moves, his eyes closed and face twisted in utter pleasure.

He was gorgeous.

Nestore lowered his head for a kiss, and when his eyes opened, my throat tightened at the look of adoration in them. It lasted only a heartbeat before he shut it off. He kissed me again, then straightened. He held my thighs as his cock twitched inside me and slowly softened. With a deep groan, he pulled out and stroked my pussy. “Red and dripping. My favorite sight.”

I shuddered, then winced when I tried to lower my legs. They ached from their awkward position, and my pussy felt slightly sore, but I felt utterly sated when I stretched out on the bed.

Nestore moved into the bathroom and returned with a towel. I held out my hand, but he shook his head. “This isn’t to clean yourself. I want my cum to stay inside you. Lift your butt.” I did as he asked, and he put the towel under my ass.

Nestore lay down beside me and pulled me against his body, then kissed my forehead and wrapped his arms tightly around me. “Every time I lay claim to your body, I feel like I could make up for the time we lost because of your running.”

Amelia pressed up against me, her breathing ragged. Exhaustion filled her gorgeous face. The night had been way too short, and yesterday had been hard for her. She needed to rest. “Sleep,” I said as I pulled the covers up over her body even though I hated to deprive myself of the view. Knowing my cum was in her pussy made it a little easier.

“It’s nine o’clock. We need to get up.”

“Who says that?”

She blinked, then gave me a small smile. “I suppose no one.”

I nodded and stroked over her soft hair. “I make the rules, and I tell you to sleep.”

“Only if you try to rest as well,” she said. She placed her palm over my heart, which beat calmly. Despite the events of the previous hours, I felt relaxed and at ease, something I could only attribute to Amelia’s presence.

“I’ll try,” I said. “You could help me.”

Amelia’s eyes crinkled with confusion. I reached for the drawer in my nightstand and pulled out the blood-covered copy of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* that I’d saved from my cell after my escape. I hadn’t touched it in a

long time. Without Amelia to read it to me, it had harbored too much pain to see it.

Her expression lit up. “You still have it?”

“Of course. You reading the book to me is one of my favorite memories from the basement.”

Amelia sank her teeth into her lower lip. “There weren’t that many good memories to pick from.”

I shook my head. “I cherish so many moments with you down there, even if they were painful. Without my captivity, I would have never gotten you.”

Amelia sat up and took the book from me. I put my head down on her chest and listened to her heartbeat. She pushed her fingers into my hair and ran her fingernails over my scalp in a way that made me want to hum. When she began to read, I closed my eyes. Her words spoke to a calm place deep inside me, a place I could rarely access.

Soon, my limbs felt heavy with sleep. Amelia’s words drifted away, and darkness claimed me.

Pain erupted through my body, and merciless blue eyes brimmed with laughter as Lamorgese pressed the branding iron against my chest. A scream ripped from my throat. I thrashed, but the bindings kept me down.

“Nestore, wake up.”

The voice that had kept me alive filtered into my mind, and I followed it out of the darkness and away from the pain. My eyes shot open to peer up into beautiful, kind blue eyes. Amelia’s lips were parted as she breathed raggedly, her expression stricken. “You had a nightmare.” She stroked my hair as if I were a little boy, and I allowed myself to lean into the touch. Amelia made even the dark moments appear a little lighter.

“I couldn’t wake you.”

“But you did. You led me back into the light.”

Her eyes softened, but the concern remained on her face. Concern for me, despite what I'd done. I'd kidnapped her and forced her to marry me, and now I forced her to stay in the very house she abhorred. I sat up and cupped her face, then brought my lips down on hers. I needed to feel her warmth, to taste her sweetness. I needed to remind myself of the good. We kissed for a while until the shrill sound of my phone ripped through the peaceful quiet. I pulled away and slanted a look at the screen to see whom I'd have to punish.

Remo

He was one of the people I couldn't punish. Dammit.

Amelia leaned back against the headboard with a look of trepidation. I grabbed my phone from the nightstand and lifted it to my ear. "Remo, to what do I owe this call?" I had an inkling of why Remo was calling me today. The news of my spectacular exchange must have reached Las Vegas by now.

"I'm currently watching helicopter footage of police shooting chimps after they ripped apart as of yet unknown victims in the Port of Los Angeles." He paused for effect, and I waited patiently for him to continue. "I remember these crazy apes distinctly from my conquest of the manor. Nino recommended we shoot them as they were obviously out of control. I thought this should be your decision, considering the manor was yours. I reckon you didn't kill them."

"Indeed," I said. I motioned for Amelia to go ahead to the bathroom. I had a feeling Remo was calling with a purpose in mind. Often, when I acted too volatile, he liked to remind me of my standing in the Camorra. His word was law, even in California.

"Apparently, a few rats kidnapped Achille Lamorgese's son, and you staged a risky exchange?"

I wondered who had leaked the information. Several of my men had known about the kidnapping and my plan. I doubted Niccolo had gone behind my back. He preferred to be honest with Remo, as did I, but he would have told me if he thought we should call our Capo. "It wasn't very risky. Chaos was on my side."

"It always is, and so is madness." Remo was one to speak. My chaos and madness were why we got along so well, or as well as one could get

along with my bloodthirsty Capo. “I assume the boy is safe and our enemies died brutally.”

“The chimps were very vengeful.”

“Given their abrupt end, you probably failed to obtain any information regarding possible supporters.” The strain in Remo’s voice revealed his anger, but I could handle it. It was my friend, not a foe.

“These men are the last of a dying species. We’ll burn them out of their dank holes even without the unreliable words out of Corvin’s mouth.”

“Considering your adept torturing skills, he would have revealed the truth eventually.”

I didn’t deny it.

“I enjoyed seeing their torn apart bodies. I’ll give you slack for that. And I’m glad those apes are finally out of the picture. I always worried they’d eat you one day. That would have been a shame.”

That probably meant he didn’t want to kill me for my actions.

“As you might have guessed, this circus spectacle isn’t the only reason I’m calling. I told Nino to schedule your next cage fight in Las Vegas for tomorrow evening, so you should probably grab a flight tonight so you have some time to acclimatize.”

“I expected an invitation from you, and I’ll be there tonight.”

“I assume Amelia will join us?”

Protectiveness reared its furious head. “She’ll be with me where she belongs.”

“Good, good. I booked a hotel suite for you in the Palazzo. Nino and I will join you for dinner at their steakhouse restaurant tonight.”

“I haven’t had a good steak in a while.”

“You’ll get one. I hope Amelia likes hers bloody?”

Remo was trying to get a rise out of me, but with him, I rarely felt the urge to snap. Maybe his volatile nature spoke to mine on a deeper level. “I’m sure she’ll appreciate her food either way.”

“Then I’ll see you tonight at eight.”

He hung up. I got out of bed and followed the sound of the shower into the bathroom. Amelia stood under the running water stream, looking absolutely breathtaking. I tracked the rivulets cascading over her ample tits and the dip of her waist down to the beautiful triangle. The moment she spotted me, she turned off the water and poked her head out. Her hair was

plastered to her head, and a few droplets caught on her lush lips and lashes. “What did he want?” The anxiety in her voice told me she had the necessary respect for Remo.

“He wants us to come to Las Vegas tonight so we can have dinner together and I can prepare for my cage fight tomorrow.”

Amelia’s face fell, her mouth falling open. She grabbed a towel, wrapped it around her body, and tiptoed toward me. Small puddles marked the spots where her wet feet had touched the marble, and her wet hair soaked the fabric of the towel, but she didn’t seem to care.

“A cage fight?”

“Most men of power in the Camorra have to do them, and it’s my turn.”

She threw up her arms. “He’s punishing you for saving Luciano!”

“If he intended to punish me, he’d do so. A fight is hardly a punishment for me, only for my opponent.”

She touched my chest. “Is it…is it a death fight?”

“They always are,” I said. I grabbed a smaller towel and carefully wrapped it around her hair.

“How can you not be scared?”

“Because I know I’ll win, especially since you’ll be watching, and I want to return to you.”

She closed her eyes and put her forehead against my chest. “I don’t like this. I don’t want to watch you get hurt. I saw too much of it already.”

“This is different,” I murmured. “We need to get dressed and pack. In order to make it to dinner with Remo and Nino, we have to grab a flight in two hours.”

“What about Luciano and Flavia? We can’t leave them alone.”

“They’ll be fine. Niccolo and our staff will take care of them and help them settle into their new home. We’ll be back in two days. They’ll survive.”

I worried about how Amelia would handle seeing me in a death fight. She had always suffered so much when I’d returned after torture, but she had to watch. Remo wanted it, and I couldn’t deny Remo.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

My pulse quickened when we left our private jet in Las Vegas. From the airport, I had a good look at the glittering skyline of the city. I had never been to Las Vegas before, and knowing who ruled here, I wasn't really all that fond of staying.

Nestore touched my lower back as he led me down the staircase and toward the waiting black Hummer limousine. The inside of the massive car was lined in lilac velvet and pink leather. Glasses with champagne waited on a small table.

I shook my head with a huff, but grabbed a glass the moment I sat down. I needed to calm my nerves, and maybe this champagne would help. Nestore regarded me curiously as I sipped at my drink. "Won't you have a taste? It calms my nerves."

"The only taste that calms me is yours. I don't drink when I'm around Remo or Nino."

I nodded. I got it. It was probably better if he kept his wits about him. "Are you sure Remo didn't lure you to Las Vegas to punish you?"

“Yes,” he said firmly. “But let me calm my nerves just in case. Lie back.”

I emptied my champagne and then stretched out on the long leather bench of the car. The privacy glass between the back and the front was up so that the driver couldn’t see us, but I was still nervous when Nestore pulled my panties aside and began to eat me out.

I came with a suppressed scream in Nestore’s mouth just a moment before the car stopped. Nestore wiped his mouth and put my panties back in place, then draped my long dress over my legs. He straightened and leaned back, looking as if he hadn’t just given me intense pleasure with his mouth and tongue. I quickly sat up and righted my hair, then downed the second champagne.

The door opened in front of a splendid hotel entrance. Nestore got out first and held out his hand. I took it and let him help me out of the high car. All eyes zoomed in on Nestore. How could they not? Even in Las Vegas, he stood out with his regal face, long black fur coat, and combat boots. At least he was wearing a shirt. Otherwise, people would probably pass out.

“Everyone admires your beauty,” he murmured.

I shook my head with a laugh. “They’re staring at you, not me.”

“Then they focus on the wrong thing.” He scanned me from head to toe, lingering on my short, wide skirt, then moving down to the white suede boots.

We didn’t have much time to freshen up in our presidential suite at the top of the Palazzo, but at least I could clean myself from our activities in the car. Nestore wanted me to wear an elegant white ruched chiffon dress that made me feel like I’d been transported here straight from the Roman Empire. The golden sandals with three-inch heels only heightened that feeling.

Nestore waited in the living area of our suite, in black jeans and combat boots, with a black knife and gun holster on his chest. His fur coat was draped over the backrest of the sofa. He fumbled with something in his hands. His eyes took in every inch of me, his expression filled with appreciation, giving me a warm feeling in my belly.

“You look like the Empress of California, dove.”

I froze at the endearment that he hadn’t used for me since I’d run. My smile felt shaky, and the hard twist of his mouth told me he hadn’t meant to

let it slip.

He shoved to his feet and stalked over to me. Despite my heels, he still towered over me by a head. When he stopped in front of me, I caught sight of the thing in his hands. A gold leaf crown hairband inspired by the ornaments that empresses in ancient Rome used to wear.

He lifted it above my head. “This is missing. I had it made for you.” He put it down on my hair and arranged it until he gave a nod. “That’s it.”

I touched the material. “Is it gold?”

“Of course,” Nestore said, touching my chin. “Only gold and diamonds for you.”

I swallowed. “Do you want to punish me or worship me?”

“Both. Always both, Amelia.”

He dipped his head and kissed me. It was sweet, gentle, and over too soon. “We should go. I don’t want to make Remo wait.”

He held out his hand, scarred palm upward. I put my hands in his, and together, we walked out. The steak house was on the ground floor, and on our way down, everyone we passed gawked at us. I couldn’t imagine that dressed-up people were such a novelty in Las Vegas, but maybe even in Sin City we stood out from others.

We passed the casino with its hum of excited voices on our way to the steakhouse. The moment we stepped inside, the scent of seared beef and truffle butter carried into my nose and made my stomach rumble. With the excitement of the day, I’d hardly eaten anything. A hostess dressed in a royal-blue cocktail dress greeted us and motioned us to follow her. The tables were draped in white linen, and golden rimmed wineglasses gleamed in the light of chandeliers dangling from the ceiling.

We were led to the very back of the restaurant, past guests who tried not to stare too openly at us—and failed. I kept my head high and focused on Nestore’s unimpressed expression. Remo and Nino sat at one of the few tables that weren’t at a window. They probably worried about someone shooting them. Their reign was still young, and like Nestore, their list of enemies was long.

The hostess gave me a small smile but avoided Nestore’s eyes. Remo and Nino stood. Neither tried to touch us, and only gave us brief nods, which I appreciated. Nestore and I sat across from them. Relief washed over me that Nino sat across from me. His gaze passed me by with utter

disinterest while Remo regarded me like a ticking time bomb. Our server appeared at our table and took our drink order.

I scanned the menu in front of me. It didn't have any prices, which confused me. "Why are there no prices?"

"Women don't get the menu with prices," Nino said.

"Oh." My eyes caught on a wagyu ribeye. It sounded absolutely delicious. A bottle of red wine and one with San Pellegrino appeared on our table. The moment the server poured me wine, I took a sip, glad for the alcohol to soothe my nerves. If I were around Remo all the time, I'd probably have to figure out a new method to calm myself.

Remo raised his glass. "Someone's thirsty."

I flushed, but didn't apologize. He was very aware of his nerve-wracking aura, and he enjoyed unsettling people, so he couldn't blame me if I needed a little pick-me-up. I raised my glass, then took another sip. "It's very good wine."

"One would hope so, considering the bottle costs five hundred dollars," Nino drawled.

My eyebrows shot up.

Remo chuckled. "We own the West."

"Not too long ago, we had to do boxing matches in dingy Bratva bars to earn enough money for food and the clothes on our backs," Nino said, turning the bottle around to read the label.

Remo nodded. "We're still fighting, but more comfortably."

"Our enemies are dying out," Nestore said, putting the wine glass back down without taking a sip.

"Old enemies are dying out, and new ones are arising," Remo said with a twisted smile. "The Outfit and Famiglia are paying close attention to what's happening in the Camorra."

"We're too strong for either of them to take on," Nestore said.

"Indeed, but maybe not if they unite again."

"They're at war because men thought obsessing over women was anything but idiocy," Remo said, his cruel dark eyes slanting to me.

Nestore squeezed my leg under the table.

The server spared us a further discussion on the matter. "Have you decided what you'd like to order?"

Remo motioned to me.

“I’d like the wagyu ribeye with truffle fries and roasted brussels sprouts.”

The men ordered next, and I fumbled with my wineglass, then cast an inconspicuous look at the tattoo peeking out of Nino’s long sleeves. It was colorful, red and yellow. Maybe flames?

Another dash of color peeked out of his turtleneck. I supposed everyone has their own way of dealing with their past trauma.

I was relieved when the food arrived. My ribeye looked mouth-watering, and the scent of the truffle made my belly rumble appreciatively.

When I took the first bite, the conversation shifted toward tomorrow’s fights.

“Nino picked an interesting opponent for you. He used to work as a freelance enforcer for the Bratva. Now he’s indebted to us. They call him the Steamroller.”

I stopped chewing, my eyes widening.

Nestore ate his T-bone and nodded. Wasn’t he worried at all? What if Remo wanted Nestore to die? I couldn’t imagine that he was happy about the way Nestore had saved Luciano.

“Your wife looks concerned,” Remo said with a hint of amusement. “Don’t you believe in your husband’s abilities?”

“I do, but nobody is invincible.”

Nestore shifted beside me and squeezed my leg again. In warning? In support?

Remo leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his muscled chest. “Our soldiers seem to think the Madman from LA is superhuman, and we want to keep up that belief.”

Nestore swallowed his meat, then bared his teeth. “We will. I’ll kill my opponent tomorrow as I’ve killed everyone before him.”

“It’s not a death fight,” Nino said, but he sounded almost bored. His gray eyes were focused on a sheet with numbers on his phone, probably incoming bets.

“It is if I’m in the cage,” Nestore said.

I slanted a look at my reflection, insecurity turning my stomach over. The dress for today was backless, which meant my scars were exposed.

Nestore entered the bedroom. Today, he was shirtless, with only his fur coat covering his upper body. He showed his scars proudly. I had never mastered that feat.

“Are you sure this is okay?”

Nestore tilted his head, his brows pulling together. “You look anything but okay. You look spectacular, like someone most men only dream about.”

“I mean, my scars. I usually hide them.”

Nestore came in and brushed his palm over my back. Goose bumps rippled across my skin from the gentle touch. “These remind me of how you helped me, how you risked your safety for me. They are proof of your kindness and only highlight your inner and outer beauty.”

Tears filled my eyes, but I blinked them back, not trusting my waterproof mascara to do its job.

“When you say things like that, it gives me hope that you’ll forgive me for running one day.”

He pressed a soft kiss to the scar below my left shoulder blade but didn’t say anything.

Despite Remo’s offer that someone would take me to Roger’s Arena, the new fighting spot in Las Vegas, I was glad Nestore had insisted we travel together.

He was quiet and focused during the ride to the arena, and when we arrived, he extended his hand for me to take without a word. I gripped him firmly to assure him I was strong enough for this. I didn’t want him to worry about me while he fought for his life. Roger’s Arena was located in

an unspectacular gray concrete building with a small red neon sign above the steel entrance door. The overcrowded parking lot had everything from tiny electronic cars to pickup trucks to luxury limousines. Nestore's fight seemed to draw lots of attention.

The bouncers stepped back with looks of shock and admiration when Nestore walked up to them, as if they had never seen him up close. He pulled me along, past the cloakroom and into a vast bar area. Smaller, round tables were arranged around a massive fighting cage in the center of the room. More comfortable-looking red leather booths were positioned against the walls. The floor and walls were bare concrete, a triste gray. The only dash of color on the walls was letters made from neon tubing, attached to mesh wire, that read honor, pain, blood, victory, and strength.

The bar, with its colorful bottles and a red background light, softened the harsh interior design.

The air was ripe with nervous energy and smelled of smoke, beer, and sweat. Nestore's fingers around mine tightened as he pulled me through the narrow gaps between the tables toward a booth where Nino and Remo sat with Fabiano and an unfamiliar teenage boy. The men at the table respectfully leaned back as Nestore and I walked by, making sure they didn't touch Nestore or me.

At least, that was what everyone did until we reached the second-to-last table before we'd reach the VIP booth. Three middle-aged men sat around the table. Several empty beer bottles and shot glasses covered the table top. The stench of alcohol was more potent here. One of the men with steel-gray hair and a scar on his cheek was groping a woman who looked to be around my age and was probably a professional, considering her very skimpy outfit and the disdainful look she gave her groper when he wasn't paying attention.

They were guffawing, and one of them gave me a leering smile as he scanned me from head to toe. Before I could react, he grabbed my hand. "Babe, ditch the lad and take a real man's dick." His hand moved toward my ass. Nestore jerked me behind him, gripped the man's throat, and catapulted him on top of the table. Beer bottles and glasses tumbled to the floor and splintered. Nestore pulled a dagger from the holster at his waist and slammed it down on the man's throat. He panted, his face alight with rage. The man's eyes were wide, his mouth parted as he gulped for breath

with the knife sticking out of his throat. His friends jumped back from the table.

“Call the police!” the steel-gray guy roared.

The woman rolled her eyes and walked away from him, but not before she stole his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans.

“Nobody touches my wife. Nobody looks at her with anything but the utmost respect and deference, and nobody talks to her like that unless they want to enjoy my wrath.” He ripped the knife out of the man’s throat, and blood spurted out of the hole in a curved fountain. Shrieks and gasps sounded around us, followed by someone throwing up.

“If that makes you vomit, you’d better leave before our Madman from Los Angeles enters the cages,” said Remo with a twisted smile as he stalked toward us.

The two friends of the dying man stood around the scene with varying looks of shock.

“He killed him!” Steel-gray shouted, looking a little green.

Blood covered the table and the floor beneath it, and slowly spread out. A few droplets had also landed on surrounding tables, but most people simply waved at the servers to clean them up.

Remo chuckled. “You are new, aren’t you?” He stopped beside the bled-out man on the table. “One of you will have to pay for his drinks. Death isn’t an excuse to skip out on the bill.”

“We’ll call the police!”

A guy from another table touched Steel-gray’s shoulder. “Stop it, mate. You’re writing your death certificate.”

Nestore took a bottle of clear alcohol from another table and doused the blood-covered blade with it until it was clean, then he put it back in his holster and grabbed my hand.

“Nino,” Remo shouted to his brother, who had stayed seated in the booth and looked mildly annoyed. “Add another fight to the list. This asshole wants to call the police.” Two bouncers grabbed Steel-gray.

“If you win against the Madman, you’re free to call the police. I’ll even pay for your drinks,” Remo said with a grin that was on the verge of madness. “If you don’t, you’ll wish for your friend’s quick end.”

The man shouted and struggled, but the bouncers dragged him to the back of the bar, where the changing rooms were.

“Dammit. He’s really a madman!” the teenage boy who looked remarkably like Nino and Remo, but prettier and less messed up, shouted with a huge smirk.

“Come on,” Nestore murmured and tugged me toward the booth. He made me sit down beside Nino, who gave me a brief nod before he turned to Nestore. “You’re disturbing my schedule.”

“I can kill him in the changing room, then you don’t have to worry about squeezing in another fight.”

Nino waved him off and moved his finger over a list on his tablet. “Remo would be intolerable if he didn’t get his will. Kill him in the cage, but make it quick. It’s a waste of time. Nobody will bet on him.”

I blinked at his analytical tone. Fabiano shook his head and downed a shot glass of a clear liquid. “I know why Remo expects you to fight more often than the rest of us. You are his version of entertainment.”

Remo and the teenage boy joined us at that moment. The younger guy sank down across from me and narrowed his eyes in thought. “Now I get why he chased you for two years—”

“Don’t say anything else, Savio,” Fabiano hissed and shoved Savio’s shoulder. “Are you daft or didn’t you see what just happened?”

“He wouldn’t kill a Falcone.”

Remo sank beside his young brother. “He’s batshit crazy, so he might. I would kill him for it, but it wouldn’t save your annoying ass, so shut up and chase another skirt.” He pointed at the girl who had stolen Steel-gray’s wallet and was enjoying a beer at the bar. “The whore’s not busy. If you need to stick your dick into a hole, pick her.”

Savio rolled his eyes and leaned back with crossed arms, but he shut up.

Nestore looked at Remo and gave a small nod, then his gaze hit me. “I’ll go change now. You’re safe here.”

Looking from Remo to Savio to Fabiano, then to Nino, I wished I had Nestore’s confidence in these men. But they freaked me out, which said a lot, considering I had just watched Nestore kill a man for trying to grope my ass.

I watched Nestore’s retreat with a sinking heart. He wasn’t worried, but with him, I was never sure if that was because he was sure of winning or if he didn’t care if he died.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Leaving Amelia in a bar full of leering men wasn't easy, but I knew Remo wouldn't let anyone near her. Because he knew what she meant to me, and because it would have undermined his own authority.

My pulse sloshed lazily in my veins after the brief spike when I'd killed the man who'd dared to insult my wife. I didn't even remember his face, only the hand reaching for something that was only mine.

His death had been too quick for the crime, and my two opponents tonight would have to quench my lust for blood and savagery.

The other fighters of the night gave me a wide berth when I picked a bench to change into my black fighting shorts.

I sank on the hardwood. Except for the shorts, I wouldn't need anything else. Unlike most other fighters, I didn't tape my hands. I preferred to feel blood and breaking bones on my bare skin. Everything that dulled my senses was ballast. Not to mention that I despised the tight sensation of the tape against my scars.

One fighter after the other left the changing room until it was time for my first fight.

The friend of the man I'd killed was led into the changing room from the outside. He'd obviously caused too much of a ruckus. They'd forced him to wear fighting shorts like the rest of us, and it didn't do him any favors. His broad shoulders told me he had probably played football in high school, but the way he rounded them and his beer belly revealed he hadn't done any sports since then. I doubted he'd fought since kindergarten.

He was a waste of my time and wouldn't sate my need for brutality. I'd have to be careful not to kill him within seconds. Though it would spare me an uninspired fight.

His terrified blue eyes darted to me, lingering on the many scars decorating my upper body. I'd survived things he couldn't even fathom.

The loudspeakers crackled, then the referee's distorted voice announced our fight, and a roar went through the audience. They always cheered, and then they threw up. The bouncers dragged him out despite his struggling. I stayed seated for a moment longer. I was still calm, the rage only a simmering deep inside me.

I pushed to my feet and walked out. The crowd parted to let me pass. Nobody tried to pat my back or shoulders as they did with the other fighters. I'd broken a few arms and hands in my first appearances before people knew I didn't appreciate being touched.

"Kill him!"

"Slaughter him, Madman!"

I gave the old man a hard look. I didn't do this for them. For these weaklings, watching fights was a way to escape the boredom of their lives. Most of them would never know pain or suffering.

My gaze moved past the cheering crowd toward the booth where I'd left my whole life. Amelia sat ramrod-straight, her fearful face directed at me. She needn't worry about me.

I drew my focus back toward the cage where my opponent was clinging to the bars, pleading with the crowd and Remo to release him. If he thought he could appeal to my Capo's humanity, he knew nothing about how he'd ripped the power from his enemies.

Even the worthless crowd laughed in the face of his terror.

I climbed the steps to the cage under the rising roar of the audience. The judge opened the door for me, then stepped back so I could enter. He

avoided my eyes and made sure he didn't touch me. My opponent pressed his back against the bars, watching me with wide, horrified eyes.

"I won't fight you! This will be the end of this bar!"

The cage door fell shut behind me with a bang.

"Let the fight begin!" the judge screamed, followed by raging applause.

I tilted my head at the cowering creature before me. Maybe someone without my disposition would have felt pity. I felt mildly annoyed that I was supposed to make this fight worthwhile.

I stepped toward him when he stayed pressed up against the bars. He fell to his knees and folded his hands in a prayer. "Please, I beg you. Show mercy."

Releasing a quiet sigh, I bridged the distance between us, determined to end this right away. This groveling creature wasn't worth my time, or anyone's.

I gripped his neck to snap it. My eye caught movement as his hand soared up toward my upper body. Pain sliced through my side. A terrified shriek drowned out the crowd's unified gasp of shock. My eyes zoomed in on Amelia, where she stood with fear-widened eyes in the booth. I gave her a small smile before I glanced down at the short pocketknife sticking out of my waist. He couldn't have picked a worse weapon. This couldn't seriously injure me, only piss me off.

"You ruined this for you," I said as I leveled my gaze on the man before me. "I had every intention of making this quick. Now I'll have to paint a picture with your bowels and blood."

I clasped his hand, still wrapped around the handle of the knife, and jerked it out. Blood trickled down into my shorts, but it wasn't enough to be worth my attention. Using his hand, I rammed the short blade into the soft spot beneath his rib cage, then twisted it around for good measure before I sliced down.

He screamed and gurgled, his eyes shock-wide as he stared down at the knife now buried in his lower belly. I ripped it out, then stepped back. He stumbled to his feet, gasping and choking, and with a resounding splash, his bowels tumbled out of the long gash and plummeted to the floor, painting it red and brown and white.

The crowd groaned, roared, and gasped, followed by gagging and vomiting.

He swayed, his eyes crossing as he stared at his bowels. He stumbled forward, then face-planted on the ground. His body convulsed with painful gasps and whimpers. I knelt and turned him over on his back, then sank my hand into his empty stomach. He choked in agony. “Did you get the knife from your friend?”

He gave a minuscule nod. I pulled my hand out, then watched as the life left his eyes. With the pocket knife in my other hand, I headed toward the door. My side stung. It wouldn’t stop me from winning my second fight of the night, but it was definitely a bother.

Amelia rushed toward the parting crowd and reached me when I stepped out of the cage. Fear lit up her eyes. I walked down the steps and cupped her throat, then lowered my head for a searing kiss that filled the bar with utter silence. People stared at us, at me, at Amelia’s scarred back. For them, I was the monster who’d disfigured her, the beast who held his beauty captive. If they knew the length I’d go to protect her, they’d fear me even more. I pulled back to Amelia’s flushed face and took her hand. She flinched. I looked down at my blood-covered hand. I had completely forgotten about the other man’s filthy blood. It should never have touched Amelia’s perfect skin.

I tightened my hold on her and led her through the alley between the crowd toward the changing room, only stopping once to ram my knife into the throat of the man who’d given my opponent the weapon. I left the blade in his body to avoid more bloodstains on Amelia. I didn’t say a word until I reached the changing rooms. There I tugged her toward a sink, turned the water on, and washed her hand with soap, then cleaned mine. She watched silently, her brows dipping with deep worry. “You’re hurt.”

I kept cleaning her hand until the water came away clear. “His blood should have never touched you.”

She touched my cheek. “What if you have internal bleeding?”

“I have endured enough torture in my life to know if I’m in imminent danger, and I’m not. It can wait until we’re back in Los Angeles.”

“There are Camorra doctors here,” she whispered, shocked.

“I’m invincible as far as these people are concerned.”

She closed her eyes and let out a shuddering breath. “I’m not sure I can bear seeing you enter that cage again.”

“You can’t leave.”

“I won’t,” she said firmly, her eyes filled with determination. “Not because Remo wants to prove a point, but because I won’t leave you. I did that once, and I won’t ever do it again. I couldn’t be with you when my father tortured you, but I can support you today.”

I wanted to hold on to the rage that had consumed me in the months and years of Amelia’s absence, but it was becoming more difficult by the day. I loved this woman. She was the only person I’d loved since my mother had been ripped from me as a little boy. She would always be the only person I loved. I kissed her, and I didn’t pull back even as the door swung open, not even as steps approached us. But I looked up when they sounded too close and raised my head to meet Nino’s evaluating gaze. “Do you need medical assistance?”

“No.”

Nino shook his head. “You don’t have to pretend in front of me. I know you’re injured. I saw you battered and broken when we conquered the mansion. It’s not a weakness to sustain an injury. It’s how we handle it that determines our strength. And you’re being unreasonable.”

“You can’t do anything. I won’t cancel my second fight, and I won’t go out there bandaged. This won’t kill me.”

Nino shrugged. “As with my brother, only your own stubbornness can kill you.” He gave me a curt nod, then he left.

Shuffling in a farther part of the changing room reminded me we weren’t alone. I raised Amelia’s hand to my lips. “Now return to the booth. I’ll have to focus on my next fight.”

She opened her mouth as if to protest, but I pressed my index finger against it. “Hush, dove. Go now.”

When I left the changing room with a heavy heart, the crowd parted for me immediately. A cleaning team was busy wiping up the blood in the cage. There was no trace of the man who had died outside the cage. His body had been carried out, and once the floor in the cage was clean, the fights would continue as if nothing had occurred. And to these people, this was ordinary. Though I noted the stench of vomit and cleaner with relief. At least some people had been shocked by the display of violence. My own belly still churned when I thought of how Steel-gray's bowels had spilled on the floor. I hadn't thrown up. Not like young Amelia on the night of Nestore's birthday. Memories from long ago popped up uninvited in my head: bowels covered the floor in the splendid ballroom, and my father looked down at the boy who'd been kind to me with cruel eyes.

I snapped back to the present day when I arrived at the booth. "Your husband knows how to put on a show. It never gets boring," Remo said, his eyes lighting up with dark amusement.

"I guess he needs a pay raise then," I said with a too-bright smile as I sank down on the bench.

Fabiano let out a choked laugh, then focused on his drink.

"He's the Underboss of the richest state in Camorra territory. Money certainly isn't an issue," Nino drawled.

"She was joking," Savio said, rolling his eyes.

“You know what your husband’s reward is for being so very entertaining?” Remo asked, his face hard.

My belly twisted.

“He gets to keep you, even if his loyalty to you trumps his loyalty to me. I’d say I could hardly give him a bigger reward.”

I swallowed thickly. “Nestore is absolutely loyal to you. He’d die for you.”

“And he’d try to kill me for you.” He leaned back, his gaze moving on to the cage where new fighters were facing each other. It seemed our conversation was over, and I decided to be even more careful around the Capo in the future. I wouldn’t tell Nestore about this. Maybe he knew, but I didn’t want to risk his safety.

When it was time for Nestore’s second fight, I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I just wanted to leave this booth, this bar, this city. I desired to get as far away from the Falcones as possible.

Nestore’s second fight took almost fifteen minutes, but not because the Steamroller stood any chance against him. He landed only two hits, one of them on Nestore’s injured side. His death was slow and agonizing. I focused on my drink in front of me, on the golden hue of my nail polish, on the markings in the dark wood of the table.

I heard a loud snap, like a thick bone breaking. When the pained gurgles finally subsided, I looked up. Nestore stood in the center of the cage, over the battered corpse of his opponent. He held something in his hand, and upon closer look, I recognized it as the man’s heart, a piece of the aorta dangling from the organ and dripping blood. The head of the man was twisted at an unnatural angle, but so were his arms and legs.

The stench of vomit hung heavily in the air. Savio let out a low whistle, but he, too, looked a little green even though he tried to play it down.

My own belly roiled violently, and only my talent to ignore what was happening around me and go to a quiet place in my head allowed me to keep my food down.

Remo stood and clapped loudly, and the crowd eventually joined in, but shock and revulsion definitely dominated the crowd’s reaction.

I brought my palms together in a half-hearted clapping motion.

Savio leaned across the table so I could hear him over the crowd. “If this doesn’t make you throw up or, better yet, run as fast as your legs can carry

you, then you must be a very messed-up chick."

I pursed my lips. "I don't fear the darkness that lurks behind Nestore's face."

Savio scoffed, then looked at Fabiano. He mouthed, "Crazy." Maybe he was right. Perhaps I was as messed up as Nestore. Maybe I had been all along. Perhaps my running had been an attempt to escape myself as much as Nestore's darkness.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Amelia's relief was palpable when we returned to Los Angeles. I didn't fear Remo as she did, nor did I mind his or Nino's presence, but I, too, was a creature of habit and preferred to be in my own territory.

I had made special plans for the night of our return to our home. The thought of it had carried me through my fights.

One more first to claim. Years of imagining this very moment would finally become reality.

I stitched myself up quickly before I led Amelia toward the rotunda with the fighting pit at the end of the premises.

I had ignored her questions, and she'd eventually given up. She followed me with a look of wariness, but I also caught the gleam of excitement in her blue eyes.

Silence filled the ranks of the amphitheater as I led Amelia down to where our seats were.

We were alone. This was a spectacle only for Amelia and me. "Kneel," I told her when we arrived in the loge. She glanced down at the fighters in

the pit who waited for my command to begin. Their attention was directed to the ground.

“They can’t see you, and even if they did, both of them will be dead by the end of the night.”

She frowned.

“The winner of this fight will face me as the last fight of the evening. Killing me is his only ticket to freedom.”

Her eyes grew wide as her gaze darted between the two fighters and me. “Why would you risk your life? You’re still injured.”

“I’m not risking my life. I’ll win. But first, I want to enjoy myself, and you.” I smirked. “Now kneel.”

Her eyes flashed with indignation and lust, even if she probably would deny the latter. She sank to her knees, stubborn gaze locked on me. I sank into my plush armchair and spread my legs.

“Begin!” I called. The fighters’ heads jerked up, and they rushed toward each other with martial screams. Tearing my eyes away from them and toward the beautiful woman kneeling at my feet, I pulled down my zipper and extracted my cock. I curled my fingers around Amelia’s neck and dragged her closer. She resisted at first, but then she allowed me to move her forward. My tip brushed over her lush lips, covering them with my precum. The sight tightened my balls with lust. With her challenging gaze on me, she licked my cum off, and her tongue darted across my tip as she did, making me gasp.

“No teasing,” I growled, tightening my hold on her neck. With gentle pressure, I eased her head down so my cock slid into her mouth. She gagged when I hit the back of her throat. I stroked her cheek with my thumb. “Take me deeper. You were made for me. You can take it.”

She loosened her jaw, and I felt her relax around me. She gripped my thighs in a tight grip as I eased more of my cock into her mouth. I groaned, my head falling back when I filled her entirely, and my balls pressed against her chin. I didn’t move, only relished the sensations. When I opened my eyes, Amelia panted around my cock, her gaze locked on my face.

The fighters groaned and gasped as their swords clanged against each other, but my eyes remained on my beautiful wife. “Move.”

She moved back. “More,” I encouraged until only my tip rested on her tongue. “Now take me back in.”

I watched my cock sliding in and out of her mouth for a while before a harsh cry drew my attention to the pit below.

Beneath us, blood spilled as one fighter cut the other's thigh open with one swipe of the blade. My cock twitched in Amelia's mouth, but I didn't spill into her yet. I had seen too much blood in my life. It barely excited me anymore, not like the sight of Amelia at my feet, struggling to breathe past my cock as my length filled her. I gripped her ponytail and stilled her movements. "My turn," I said. I thrust upward once, not as deep as I wanted yet, but to warm her. My next thrust hit deeper and harder, and she gagged. She glared up at me with watering eyes, and I tightened my hold on her ponytail, really sinking my fingers in to keep her under control. Thrusting up didn't have the desired effect, so I shoved her head down so she took even more of my cock. She coughed and choked but kept up the rhythm. My balls tightened. The injured fighter landed a hard punch, then shoved his blade into the other's belly. I smiled. Deadly stab. I lowered my gaze to Amelia, no longer interested in the fight. I moved her head fast, my cock hitting the back of her throat over and over again, and as the last gurgles died down below us, my balls exploded, and I spurted my cum down Amelia's throat.

I kept pumping. "I dreamed of this moment in my darkest hours," I rasped as I stilled. My cock released its last jets in her mouth, then stopped twitching. I kept Amelia's head in place so my cock filled her mouth as it slowly softened. I shuddered in another wave of pleasure as some of my release trickled out of the corner of her lips. Then down her chin. "Beautiful," I crooned as I untangled my fingers from her ponytail and stroked her hair. Amelia pulled back, releasing my cock from its pleasurable confines. She swallowed, then licked her swollen ruby lips. A flush tinged her cheeks. I wiped my cum off her chin and lips, then reached down between her legs and wiped it across her swollen clit. Her eyes were clouded with desire and the hint of anger. Both turned me on as nothing had ever before.

The first fight had ended with the death of one fighter. A clean-up crew hosed down the fighting pit.

"Second fight," the announcer said. I circled her clit until the anger was erased by lust, then I pulled my hand away.

“Come,” I told Amelia, holding out my hand for her to take. I pulled her to her feet. Below us, the fighting had resumed, grunts and pants carried up. “Turn around and brace yourself on the railing. They can only see your face and upper body.” Amelia frowned, but did as directed. She was already well prepped from my clit ministrations and didn’t need much prompting. Her elegant fingers curled around the railing, and she propped her ass toward me as she leaned forward. Her body tensed as a pained groan sounded in the pit. I reached under the hem of her dress, cupping a firm ass cheek and squeezing hard before I slid lower, following the curve to the apex between her thighs. I slid my middle finger along the sopping wet crease of her panties, making her arch her back, but retracted my hand before the pleasure could manifest. She tossed me a disbelieving look over her shoulder. I lifted her skirt and draped it over her back. It was a sight I’d hope to see in my last moments on earth.

She stiffened, her gaze darting back to the pit below as if she worried anyone could see her from their vantage point. Even if they did, it was irrelevant. One of them would be dead after this fight, and the other would fight me at the end of the night and be dead then. They would carry the view of Amelia to the grave with them. Amelia’s white panties were wet with her need for release. I tugged them down her slim legs, letting them pool by her feet. Then I enjoyed the view of her jutted out ass. I could see her pussy peeking out between those pretty thighs. I slapped her ass hard once, leaving a red hand-shaped imprint on milky skin.

She shot me an indignant look. “What did I do?”

“It was a mere warning. I can sense your petulance.”

Her fingers on the railing tightened as I rubbed her ass cheeks, then parted them to look at the pretty rosette I’d teased once before. My mouth watered thinking about it. I leaned forward and swiped my tongue over it. I wanted to wet it. I circled her puckered hole for a while, enjoying her breathy gasps. I needed more. I extended my tongue and entered her. My eyes closed as I fucked her slowly with my tongue. She felt impossibly tight. I moved back and slid my thumb between her folds, gathering her juices, then rubbed them over her back entrance. I pushed my thumb into her. Amelia let out a shuddery groan and widened her stance, giving me an even better view of her pussy as she tried to get used to the feeling of my finger inside her back hole.

Her clit was desperate for attention, but today was about punishment and learning patience. Her eyes fluttered shut as I established a slow rhythm with my thumb, then switched to a gentle circle. A soft moan sounded, making my dick twitch. I was already ready to spill my cum in Amelia again, but this time, I'd claim her back entrance, the last of the firsts she owed me. With my thumb on her puckered opening, I reached down with my index finger and parted her folds, sliding up until I brushed her desperate clit. Pushing my thumb into her ass, I circled her button lightly until her pelvis began to rock against my touch for more friction. My cock was already rock hard again from staring at her glistening pussy and tight ass. Precum glistened on my head, and I swiped it all over to slick myself up. Not enough.

I pulled Amelia back by the hips until her pretty ass hovered in front of my face, then pulled her down until she straddled my legs. I rubbed my head over her soaked pussy for additional lubrication. I dipped in with just the head, making her moan, so fucking eager for me to fuck her, to make her come until her throat was raw from screaming in ecstasy.

"You want to come around my cock?"

"Yes," she breathed, tossing me a needy look over my shoulder. Fuck. Amelia owned me in every regard. One look from her was enough to set me aflame. I didn't want her to hold power over me, but taking power from her proved difficult.

"You will, but you'll have to pay for it with pain."

Her brows snatched together in confusion. I dragged my cock out of her pussy and moved it back until the tip pressed against her even tighter hole. Her eyes filled with anxiety. I cupped her throat with one hand while the other teased her swollen clit, prepping her for what was to come.

"Relax. You can take me." I forced her back with the grip around her throat until her ass pressed against my cock, and finally, the head breached the tight muscles. Her hole stretched as far as it would go. She gasped in pain, her back arching and pulse racing under my fingertips. I stroked her throat, mesmerized by the look on her beautiful face, torn between pain and lust. I rubbed her clit harder until her muscles loosened around my cock, then dragged her back farther, claiming more of her. I waited. Maybe a third of me was inside, and she looked close to the limit of what she could take,

but neither of us was a stranger to going beyond our limits. I eased back an inch, then moved in again.

Her pulse throbbed under my fingertips, and I could feel every hard swallow. “Don’t fight it. Embrace the pain, and allow your body to accept it.”

She drew in a deep breath through her nose. I massaged her throat as I cupped her pussy with my other hand, pressing my heel down on her button hard. She exhaled, and her tense muscles loosened ever so slightly around my cock. The pleasure of being inside her was still almost blinding in its intensity, almost painful, just as I liked it.

I slid my fingers along her silky pussy lips, gathering her arousal, then coated her clit with it so my fingers could work it better. I began to rub small circles on her clit until she was panting and her ass relaxed further. I wanted more. I wanted her to come undone on top of me, begging me for more even as she cried that she couldn’t take it. I pressed down on her clit, making Amelia writhe on top of me, and drove my cock even deeper into her rear entrance. I groaned low in my throat, my eyes rolling back in my head as my balls threatened to erupt, but I shoved down the impulse. This was far from over.

Amelia froze, shuddering as pain mingled with pleasure once more. Soon, her hips chased my finger, needing more friction against her throbbing button. Pain didn’t matter. She needed release, so she shifted her hips, moving my dick deliciously inside her.

I knew when pleasure overrode pain, when the stretching of her ass turned from agony to a thrilling dull ache. She threw her head back against my shoulder, baring her throat in the most tantalizing way and grinding her ass against my pelvis until I wasn’t sure where my body ended and hers began. I moved my finger faster against her clit, and a cry erupted from her throat, overshadowing the sound of fighting below, echoing over the ranks. She clenched around my cock, and I lost all semblance of control and spilled into her.

She shuddered even harder, small sob-like moans falling from her lips as her pussy spasmed against my fingers.

I ran my lips along her jawline to her ear. “I meant to deny you longer, but it’s difficult to resist you, dove. Your ass milked my cock so fucking well. You’ll feel the stretching for days.”

She sagged against me, her breathing uneven. Her eyes locked on mine, and my heart seemed to splinter at the knowing gleam in them. She already owned every single part of me.

She couldn’t know how right she was. I wasn’t sure if I’d ever tell her.

I didn’t understand the look in his eyes. He looked almost scared of me. “I’m not my father,” I said, because maybe he’d drifted back to the past and I needed to remind him of the present.

He tilted his head. “I know who you are, dove.”

When he softened inside me, I felt a strange mix of relief and loss. He pulled my head further around and kissed me, his tongue plunging in. I leaned into the kiss, allowing my body to relax. It still hummed with the remnants of pleasure and pain. I felt utterly sated, and also a little overwhelmed.

A pained gasp reminded me of the fight happening below us. My cheeks heated. How much had these men seen? How much had they heard? I hadn’t held back my screams when I’d come.

Nestore stroked my warm skin. “You worry too much. I’ll kill them so they take those memories to the grave with them.” He gripped my hips and lifted me off his lap and onto the seat beside his. I sank my teeth into my lower lip at the strange sensation in my butt. Nestore wiped himself clean with a napkin and then pulled up his pants. “I’ll fight now. Wait for me.”

I nodded, my lids heavy with tiredness. When Nestore disappeared, I pulled up my panties and draped my skirt over my legs. I shifted uncomfortably when I felt the proof of our joining run out of me.

Why had Nestore claimed me like this, right here? Did he want to dominate me? To remind me of his power? I wasn't sure. He always made sure I felt pleasure.

Nestore appeared in the pit below. Tonight, I wasn't scared for him.

None of the fighters could win against him.

Thirty minutes later, both his opponents were bloody corpses.

I rose to my feet, ready to leave and go to bed. I ascended the staircase to the upper landing, then took down the long winding staircase to the lower floor. Nestore was waiting for me by the exit, covered in blood and new bruises. He held out his hand, the only clean part of him. Had he cleaned it so he could touch me?

I linked our fingers, and together, we walked out, then up the long pathway back to the mansion I despised.

My ass was sore, and every step ached, which should have been torture, but beyond that, it turned me on. It had been painful, but the orgasms that followed had made up for it, and I yearned for more. Not that I thought my body could take it. If Nestore decided to shove his cock into my back entrance again soon, he'd probably split me in two.

"You look at our home as if it were your demise."

"It is, and it is yours too," I said. I couldn't wait to get out of my clothes, especially my ruined panties.

For once, Nestore didn't argue. Maybe he was finally coming around.

"But I'll brave these haunted walls for you, Nestore."

His jaw tightened, and his fingers twitched against mine.

Back in our primary bedroom, Nestore and I showered together. He gently cleaned my most private area with a washcloth. I did the same for him, being extra gentle so I wouldn't irritate his many scars.

When we curled up in bed together, I pressed a kiss to his throat.

"When I hunted you, I longed for your hatred and fear, but now all I crave is your love." He sounded tortured, as if those words doomed him.

"You have it," I admitted in a whisper. I had never stopped loving him, even when I wanted to hate him.

Nestore stilled, his breath halting. He released it in a rush. "I lied."

I pulled back to look at his handsome face. “About what?”

“About my firsts.”

I blinked, not sure I heard him right. “What do you mean?” A small flame of hope flickered in my chest, but I was terrified his next words would extinguish it.

He cupped my cheek, self-hatred edged into his face. “When you ran, I tried to be with another woman, to have her suck me off, but I couldn’t even bear her touch. Her fingers against my skin made me want to rip them off her hand.”

“You mean…”

“My firsts were yours too. Like I promised all those years ago.”

Tears shot into my eyes, and I didn’t hold them back. “But how? How did I not notice?”

“I’m a man who’s learned to put on a show, to become someone other for people not to see my true self. You saw what you expected to see.”

I shook my head. “You knew what to do.”

“I watched and learned.” Nestore wiped the tears off my cheeks with his thumb.

I kissed his chest, then his throat, and last his lips. “I can’t tell you how happy that makes me. You are all mine.”

“I always was and always will be, dove. My heart rests in your pretty palms, and it’s on you to either squash it or keep it safe. Nobody else holds that power.”

“And you hate that,” I said thickly.

“I must hate something, and it can’t be you.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I woke to an empty bed. Without bothering to turn on the lights, I grabbed my dressing gown, allowing the moonlight streaming in through the windows to guide my way. It would be even darker where I'd go next.

I had a sinking feeling that I knew where I'd find Nestore.

He'd been vulnerable by admitting his firsts were mine, and now he needed to feel powerful again, to unleash the hatred and rage he couldn't unleash on me.

I trembled as I descended the staircase into the basement. I heard a pained gasp and froze on the last step, leaning against the rough wall of the stairwell, and closed my eyes. My heart pounded in my chest. I didn't want to take the last step.

I shuddered, then set my foot down. A small scream escaped my lips when a shadow fell over me. "You shouldn't be here." Nestore's voice was menacing. He took my upper arm and dragged me back upstairs. He didn't stop until we reached the bedroom. I turned on the light. I needed to see his face, but it didn't bring the consolation I hoped. Blood splatters covered his face and throat. He dropped his hand from my arm, where blood now

smeared my skin. “You said you’d never touch me with blood-covered hands again.”

His expression fell. He stormed into the bathroom and returned with a wet washcloth. I watched his face as he cleaned my skin with furrowed brows as if the task required all his attention.

He finally met my gaze.

I cupped his face despite the darkness in his eyes.

“Nestore, if you love me, stop. If any part of you, of the boy I love, has survived, stop this madness. You’re becoming like him. Don’t give him this power.”

Fury lit up his eyes. “Don’t doubt my love for you. Why can’t you love the man I’ve become? The boy you keep mentioning is dead. He was killed by your father during the years locked in the basement. You should know.”

I knew. I ran my thumb over the stubble on his cheeks. “I love them both, which is why I want you to salvage your humanity.”

“I can’t kill him.”

I nodded because I’d expected that answer. Maybe he really couldn’t end his life.

But I could.

Could I?

I thought about ways to kill my father over the next two days. Nestore was busy with work, while I went through the arsenal of weapons that I had easy access to. The samurai sword in the foyer was out of the question, as were the kitchen knives. The idea of getting close enough to my father for either of those weapons to kill him was out of the question. I needed a less personal way to end his life.

But wasn’t killing someone always personal, no matter how you did it?

Eventually, I decided to steal one of the guns my bodyguards always carried in the holsters around their hips. They always took them off together

with their jackets when they had lunch in the kitchen, a fact that I used to my advantage.

When I entered the kitchen, everyone stood at attention. My bodyguards rose from their chairs.

“I just want to join you for lunch. I don’t want to eat alone as long as my husband is away for business.” I had done it a couple of times before, but had always felt uncomfortable because of their tenseness.

Today, however, I had a task in mind. Steaming bowls of minestrone sat in front of each of my three present guards. I stepped up to one of the vacant chairs where they had draped their gun holsters and jackets over.

“That looks delicious,” I said.

“Would you like us to fix you a bowl?” Mindy asked with a shy smile, her hands clasped in front of her belly.

I smiled. “Yes, and a chunk of ciabatta if you don’t mind.”

I pulled the chair back and pretended to accidentally throw the top jacket and holster to the ground. My bodyguards began to rise, but I lifted my hand. “Let me. I dropped them, so I’m picking them up.” I waited for them to sink back down before I bent down, making sure my ass was turned their way so they had no choice but to avert their eyes. They never knew whether the kitchen staff would rat them out if they checked me out. I used their moment of inattentiveness to open the holster and slip one of the two guns into the waistband of my tights. My dress was a loose-fitting A-line, so it concealed the shape of the gun now hidden beneath it. I draped the holster covered by the jacket over the chair, then sat down. The gun dug uncomfortably into my belly, but I couldn’t do anything about it now.

A bowl of minestrone was waiting for me with a big, chunky piece of ciabatta. I poured some olive oil onto a small plate, then sprinkled on a little salt and pepper before I dipped the bread in. I let out a sigh when I took a bite of the ciabatta, then dunked it into the soup and let the bread soak up the broth and olive oil. The result was melt-in-your-mouth delicious.

My bodyguards resumed eating their own lunch, and I noticed the leather satchel where they kept their dice. They always played a couple of rounds for money after lunch. I counted on them to do the same today. That way, it would take a while before one of them would notice the missing gun. It was a risky plan, but the only one I could come up with. I didn’t want to ask Flavia to buy a gun on the black market. Nestore hadn’t

punished her for helping me hide, and I didn’t want her to raise his ire in any other way.

When I had eaten my bread and half of the soup, I rose to my feet. “Thank you for lunch. I need to lie down a bit. I’m tired. Enjoy the rest of your meal.”

My bodyguards rose a few inches from their chairs, then sank down in unison when I turned. I walked out in unhurried steps even as my pulse spiked. The moment I stood in the entrance hall, I sucked in a deep breath.

I wished I had time for a pep talk, but I couldn’t risk my bodyguards finding out what I’d done. My gaze moved past the kitchen door to the heavy steel of the very door that led down into the basement. It wasn’t the first time I’d gone down there after my escape, but I’d never been alone and never with the intention to kill my father.

I took a step closer, then another. Laughter rang out in the kitchen, reminding me of the very real danger of being caught before I managed to follow through with my plan. I couldn’t falter. I needed to gather my courage and do what needed to be done.

My pulse raced in my veins as I walked purposely toward the door and opened it. The darkness of the stairwell gaped menacingly before me. Fear clawed at my chest and made my throat tight. I took a step down, then another, goose bumps rising on my skin from the cold and the terror taking hold of me.

I could do this. For Nestore. For me. For both of us.

When I reached the last step, I paused and sucked in several quick breaths.

“Those are female steps,” a raspy, old voice said from the dark.

I jumped, my heart jerking against my rib cage as if it was trying to get out.

“It’s you, Amelia. My daughter.”

I shuddered and finally took the last step down into the basement. The stench of feces, blood, and urine permeated the dank air. Horrid memories scratched at the forefront of my mind, wanting to take over.

My eyes took a moment to get used to the dim light down here, and when they did, I noticed Father’s hunched figure on the cot in the last cell.

Rattling breathing filled the room. The shuffling of my shoes and my own rapid breathing caused a pause in my father’s. The strong stench of

decay filled my nose, triggering revulsion and memories from a past neither Nestore nor I could escape. I crossed the distance with purposeful steps but stopped two arm's length from the bars. The gun felt cool against my belly. It steadied me, but at the same time, the idea of using it terrified me.

"Have you finally come to save me from your husband's brutal hands?"

I was glad for the dim light so I couldn't make out more than the schemes of my father's face. "No. Whatever Nestore has done to you, you deserved it. You turned him into the brutal hand that now tortures you. Without your cruelty, none of this would have happened."

"Spoken like your pitiless husband. What has become of you, Amelia?"

"You locked me in a basement. You had me tortured and humiliated. That's what happened. *You* happened."

"Then why are you here if not to free me? Do you want an apology for what I've done? Do you want to see me cower with repentance?"

I smiled bitterly even as my heart clenched tightly. How could this man be my father? His blood ran in my veins. The idea alone made me feel sick to my stomach.

I reached under my dress and pulled out the gun from my waistband.

Father sat up straighter and cackled. "Have you come to kill me?"

I swallowed. "Yes." The admittance felt good.

He cackled again. "Your husband will punish you if he finds out. He doesn't want me dead. You'd be doing me a favor."

I didn't want to do this for him.

Was he manipulating me?

It didn't matter. My decision was made. I wouldn't back out now. I wouldn't get another chance. My fingers around the gun tightened as I approached the bars. My heartbeat pounded so loudly, it echoed in my ears.

I didn't look into my father's eyes. I didn't want a last goodbye. There was nothing left to say between us. Yet I couldn't move. I felt suspended between my need to end this and my fear of what this murder would do to me.

It would save Nestore.

I put the barrel through the bars, aimed down at the cot, and squeezing my eyes shut, I fired until the *click click* of the chamber told me I had run out of bullets. I gasped for breath when the last shot faded, and silence reigned around me. The rattling breathing was no more.

An act of pity? Or an act of selfishness? Or an act of love for Nestore?

Maybe a little of all three. I couldn’t think clearly anymore.

Steps thundered down the stairwell.

My eyes fluttered open, briefly catching on the slumped corpse before they darted down the hallway to the back door.

The door swung open and slammed against the wall. Nestore’s tall form loomed in the doorway, naked except for his black fur coat and a long knife in his hand. My dark avenging angel who had fallen so deep. Why was he here?

“Amelia! What have you done?” he roared as his eyes settled on the cage.

He rushed toward me and jerked me away from the bars. He stared at the remains of my father, but I only looked at him, hoping for a flicker of relief on his face. There was only fear and terror.

“What. Have. You. Done?” he asked in a hushed whisper, which scared me more than his rage. His eyes met mine, his almost black with anguish and fury.

“I ended it.” I swallowed. “For you. For me.”

He stalked toward me and gripped my shoulders. “You did this for him!”

“No!” I touched his cheek, my palm against another scar my father had inflicted on him. “I did this for you, Nestore. Because as long as he lived, you weren’t free. Even if he was in your hands, he held power over you by existing. Every time you went to torture him, a little less of you returned to me. I had to do it or lose you.”

“Lies!” Nestore growled, his fingers digging into my flesh.

I held his furious gaze. “Don’t you dare call me a liar. Maybe not all of my reasons for killing him were about you. Maybe I was being selfish too because I want to preserve what’s left of the boy I loved with all my heart.”

He grabbed my face, bringing our faces close together. “That boy is dead, Amelia. Dead.”

A few tears fell from my eyes and trailed down my cheeks. “Sometimes I think you want him to be.”

“I do,” he said harshly. “He was weak. All he reminds me of is pain and humiliation. I’ve become so much more than him.”

“All he reminds you of is pain and humiliation?” I swallowed hard. “What about me?”

His eyes flickered with hesitation. “You are here. You are more than my past. That boy was too weak to protect you, too weak to really make you his. But I’m not. I can and will protect you until my last breath, and I made you mine.”

“But I was his—I was *yours* in your weakest moments, and I’m yours now as you exert your power in the cruelest ways. I’ll always be yours, Nestore, even if I’m terrified of what it’ll do to me or where it’ll take me.”

“Into darkness and damnation, that’s where. I wish I could spare you that fate, but I can’t be without you. I can’t let you go, even if it would save you.”

“I wouldn’t let you. I left once, but I won’t leave again. It doesn’t matter where I go. I always take you with me.”

Nestore’s eyes strayed from mine again, and his expression twisted with renewed rage and a hint of utter madness. “Go.”

“Nestore.”

“Go before I do something I’ll regret my entire life.”

“You wouldn’t hurt me.”

“Just go. I need to calm the chaos in my head, and I can’t do it with you right here.”

I stepped back. The look of fury in his eyes finally made me turn around and take flight. I knew he wouldn’t hurt me, but he deserved the time to come to terms with what I had done.

I unlocked the cell door and went inside, my heart pounding in my chest as it had always done when I was close to Lamorgese, even when he was the one in a cage at my mercy. I had kidded myself into believing our balance of power had shifted simply by locking him in, but until the end, he had held power over me. Maybe he still did.

The air carried a sharp, biting scent from the fired shots.

I sagged to my knees, my bones flaring with pain at the impact. The tang of burned metal clung to my nose. I shuddered violently. What would I do now that he was dead? How would I tip the power in my favor?

Rage and despair battled inside my body. How could Amelia have done this to me? I was glad she was out of sight. I wasn’t in control, and I worried about what I would do to her.

I had spent the past three years torturing my tormentor, hoping it would heal the wounds he had left, praying it would make the nightmares go away, and would give me a sense of peace, but none of it had happened.

I glowered at the corpse, his emaciated form littered with wounds. He didn’t bear any semblance to the man who’d destroyed me, who had killed me in every way but one.

I shuddered, then sagged forward, burying my face in my hands. I felt as if I might cry, as if I still held the potential for it, but instead, I tossed my head back and let out a despaired scream. A shuffle made me glare toward the cell door.

Amelia. Like an apparition in all white and without a sense of the danger she was in.

“Leave,” I croaked as I shuddered again.

“No.”

She didn’t. She took a few hesitant steps into the cell. She, too, was caught up in memories of this place. Her eyes focused on me, and not the bloody body by my side, as she bridged the last few steps between us and knelt behind me. She wrapped her arms tightly around me from behind and put her cheek down against the naked skin of my back.

“I’m not myself.”

“I know,” she whispered.

“I could hurt you.”

“I know.” She pressed a kiss to my skin. “But you won’t, and I won’t leave. I left once. I won’t again, not when you need me to find yourself.”

“I’m not sure there’s anything in there to find.”

She nodded against my back as if she was well aware of it. “I’ll stay.”

I closed my eyes, a tremor going through my body as I grieved for what I’d lost in this cell, for what Lamorgese had taken from me brutally. I grieved the chance to end his life, and felt relief because I knew I would never have the strength to do it. Maybe Amelia had really freed me, even if I couldn’t see it yet.

Something wet trailed down my left cheek. A single tear. I let it catch on my chin, then fall and splash on the floor.

“He’s your father,” I said. “If you want, mourn him now. I won’t bury him. I’ll feed him to the animals. Nothing of him will remain on this earth, not even a grave with his name on it.”

“I don’t need time to mourn, nor a place to mourn a man who ruined the word father to me for all time.”

I reached over my shoulder, holding out my hand toward Amelia. She took it, and I pulled us both to our feet. With a last fleeting glance at the corpse, I walked out with Amelia by my side.

When we reached the entrance hall and the heavy door fell shut behind us, Amelia reached up and cupped my cheeks, her eyes soft. “Maybe you should remove the cells, or lock the entire basement for good. Nothing but nightmares wait down there. If we want to feel at home in this place, it

needs to stop being the source of so much misery and pain. Let this be our place where we heal together."

"I have many enemies, and so does the Camorra. I'll keep handling them as I used to."

"You can, just not here. I want this to be a place of love, not violence. These walls have seen too much of it already, and you can end it."

I closed my eyes, relished in the feel of her soft palms against my skin. Maybe she was right. Perhaps I needed to turn this into a place where I could find peace.

I opened my eyes and bent down to kiss Amelia. "I'll do it for us. I'll trust you to lead us into the light, even if I'm still lost in the dark."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Chaos filled my head, and my ears rang with noise. I needed to run or lose my mind. “I have to leave for a little while, but I’ll be back as soon as the chaos is silenced.”

Amelia’s eyes filled with fear. “I don’t want you to leave.”

I pressed my index finger against her lips before she could say more. “Hush, dove. There’s no stopping me.” She opened her mouth to protest, but I shook my head with a warning look.

“But for how long will you be gone?”

I wished I knew. The chaos in my head felt too overpowering to ever get it under control, but the thought of being gone for more than a few days from Amelia seemed like torture, too. “Soon. A couple of days. I need to…” I wasn’t sure how much blood I needed to spill to feel back in control.

She gave a small nod, but her eyes filled with fear and sadness.

“Shower and dress. I want you to throw away everything you wore today. These clothes carry the memories of what happened. I don’t want them to burden you. I’ll have someone drive you to Flavia so you can spend the afternoon with her.”

She blinked, stunned, and even more confused. “Nestore, you’re scaring me. I’m really worried about you.”

“Don’t worry about me.” I forced a smile that threatened to splinter my skin. “Worry for the people I seek out to unleash my rage.”

“You won’t kill my bodyguards, right?”

I peered down at the gun in my hand. It was Rodolfo’s. There was an R engraved into the barrel. He was loyal. He had been from day one. I should kill him for his mistake.

I shook my head. I didn’t want to kill one of my soldiers. I would burn and kill today, but not him.

“Why were you home? I thought you were at work.”

“I was on the premises, down by the enclosures, when my phone sounded an alarm because someone had opened the basement door. There are surveillance cameras in the stairwell and down in the cellblock.”

“Oh.”

I kissed her, then pulled back. “Don’t try to keep me here.” I backed away, then turned. The moment I was out of the house, I allowed the rage to come forth. Niccolo waited at his car. “Oh shit,” he said when he saw my face. “I’m not sure I want to be in a car with you. What happened?”

I skirted past him and got into the passenger seat. A couple of moments later, Niccolo got in as well, but his expression was cautious.

“Amelia killed Achille.”

The words sounded flat, as if it wasn’t of consequence to me, but the stabbing pain in my chest and the utter sense of powerlessness told a different story. He was gone. Shouldn’t I feel like I had won? Like I was finally in absolute control? He would never be able to manipulate or taunt me again.

And I would never be able to make him pay for what he’d done.

Niccolo’s eyes widened, and he dropped his hand from the button that would have started his car. “Oh damn. That’s not good.”

I grimaced. “Didn’t you tell me over and over again to kill him?”

“I did, until I didn’t because you threatened to rip my tongue out.” He pressed the engine button, putting the car into Drive. “Now I’m almost scared to ask what you did to Amelia.”

I glanced at the mansion, which became smaller as he headed down the driveway. Away from Amelia.

“Nothing,” Niccolo said with a disbelieving laugh. “Wow.”

“Take me to the Bratva hideout where they killed one of our drug dealers.” I’d begin there and then see where my rage would take me next.

Niccolo let out a low whistle. “You’re going to spill blood.”

“Blood and bowels. I need to unleash the rage inside me.”

“As long as you don’t unleash it on me, I’m fine. I have plans for tonight which I’d loathe to cancel because I’m dead.”

“We are family. It would take a lot for me to kill you.”

Niccolo chuckled. “To be honest, for a while I wasn’t so sure.”

“For a while, I wasn’t either, but now I am.” I could kill him, like I could kill anyone I knew, except for Amelia, but I didn’t want to. With Amelia, it wasn’t as simple as not wanting to kill her. I knew I’d be physically unable to kill her. I’d ram the blade into my own heart before I’d kill her with it.

“Should I call for reinforcements?”

“I’ll go in there alone.”

“No, you won’t. I’ll come with you. Madness doesn’t make you invincible.”

I nodded. “No one else.” We left the walls covered with rose tendrils behind, and I felt a mix of longing and relief like I did every time.

“What are you going to do now?”

“About the corpse? Tell trustworthy men to drag it down to the enclosures and feed him to the lions. If anything of him remains, I want them to dump it in the ocean so fish devour it.”

Niccolo smirked then nodded, his eyes focused on the traffic ahead. “All right. Any other plans I should be aware of? Amelia seems to bring change.”

I narrowed my eyes at my cousin, not sure if he was mocking me, but he looked relieved. Change. Maybe it was really time for it. “I want you to find someone who can brick up the entrance to the basement.”

Niccolo nodded. “All right. Noted. So you’ll keep personal prisoners in our official prison now?”

“Yes.” I hadn’t had a personal prisoner except for Achille since I’d killed the last of the other men who’d tortured me a year ago.

Niccolo parked in front of the warehouse that housed two to five Bratva soldiers. I closed my eyes and allowed the rage to come forth. Taking a

deep breath, I shoved open the door and got out.

I had a knife and a gun in the holster under my coat. I hoped I'd get the chance to use my bare hands, though. I needed the personal kill.

Niccolo caught up with me, his gun drawn. "I'll watch your back. I assume you want to do the killing?"

"Yes. I need to."

With a martial scream, I kicked in the wooden back door and allowed darkness to consume me.

I showered and stuffed today's clothes into a garbage bag, then I dressed in a flowy white skirt and a short-sleeved white blouse.

A stone seemed to weigh down my stomach, and I felt a little nauseous. What was Nestore doing?

He had looked unhinged, and without me to anchor him, what would he do? When I sent him a message, it didn't go through, so he must have turned his cell phone off.

Sighing, I headed downstairs. Two of my bodyguards waited for me in the foyer, one of them was Rodolfo, the man whose gun I'd stolen.

His expression was tight, but he didn't say anything. I considered apologizing, but could you apologize for something you'd do again?

I followed them toward the black limousine in silence. My mind tried to revisit what I'd done, but I blocked any thought of my father. I felt too fragile, too unstable to think of it now.

Flavia lived only a five-minute drive from the mansion, a fact that made me incredibly happy.

My bodyguards parked the car in the tree-lined driveway of the bungalow that was Flavia and Luciano's new home. I got out but had to wait for Rodolfo to ring the bell. Another man, Flavia's bodyguard, opened the door. After a short exchange, I was allowed to enter.

Flavia and Luciano were at the kitchen table, drawing with crayons. Sunshine flooded the rooms through the floor-to-ceiling windows, offering a view down the Hollywood Hills.

Flavia got up when she saw my face and rushed over to me. She wore jeans and a tank top, no shoes, and pulled me into a hug, then regarded me with a deep frown. "You look pale."

I gave her a weak smile. We were alone. Our bodyguards waited in the background to give us privacy, so I whispered, "I killed him."

Flavia's eyes widened. "Achille?"

I nodded. Luciano put down his crayon and raced toward me, colliding with my legs like a tiny wrecking ball. I lifted him and kissed his cheek, glad for the distraction as I felt a suspicious prickling in my eyes. He scrunched up his face. "I'm a big boy."

"You are," I agreed and set him back down. He returned to the table and picked up a black crayon. Most of his pictures were in black and white, something that worried me. Was it a reflection of his young soul? The darkness of our world had touched him, like it did everyone eventually.

"Amelia," Flavia hissed under her breath. "What happened?"

"I shot him. I ended it."

My voice sounded hollow and unemotional. Flavia narrowed her eyes. "You're freaking me out a little."

"Because you didn't think I was capable of killing someone."

"Of course not, you and I were both capable of killing our tormentor, but you seem…off."

I forced a smile, not wanting to give in to the tears. I wasn't even sad. I didn't mourn my father. I'd despised him, but a tiny childish part of me mourned a father figure I wished I had had. Someone who had never existed and now never would. Not that my father would ever have become a decent father. "Aren't you relieved?"

“Of course, I am relieved he’s dead, but I wish it hadn’t been you.” She squeezed my hand. “Will you be all right?”

“I hated him.”

She nodded, then smiled sadly. My eyes felt too hot. “Sometimes our emotions don’t make sense. Sometimes we can mourn the end of something even if we’re glad it’s ended.”

I closed my eyes because I wouldn’t cry—not with Luciano in a room with us, and not because of my fucking father. “I’m fine,” I pressed out with a glance at Luciano, who was bowed low over his drawing.

She gave a small nod, then looked toward the window, her face full of disbelief. “But what about your husband? Won’t he be mad?”

“He already knows, and he’s mad, but mainly he’s confused. It’ll be fine.”

“Oh, Amelia.”

I gave her a brighter smile. “It’ll be fine. Now we can move on.”

She touched my shoulder. “I hope so. I want nothing more than for you to get the bright future you deserve.”

When we pulled away from Flavia’s house, I felt a tiny bit more hopeful, even if I still worried about Nestore. My messages hadn’t gone through yet.

Nestore didn’t come home that night, and when I woke the following morning with my messages still unanswered, a deep sense of unrest overwhelmed me. I understood that Nestore needed to unleash his demons after what I’d done, but I wished he’d keep me in the loop.

I got dressed and ate a few crumbs of breakfast before I decided to distract myself with my favorite thing in the world: flowers. I missed working with them. The gardens were bare of flower beds, and the roses in the maze creeped me out too much. I went in search of my bodyguards and found them in their staff room. “Can you take me to a flower shop?”

Rodolfo practically jumped up. “Of course. Do you have one in mind?”

I didn’t, so I did a quick internet search for shops, then gave the address to my bodyguards. The sun was shining beautifully, the sky over Los Angeles cloudless. Sometimes I felt as if our manor was in another dimension, removed from the world around us.

When I walked into the flower shop and breathed in the scent of the many different blooms, a small smile tugged at my lips despite the tension

in my body. I scanned the display of flowers, trying to decide which to include in my arrangement. The florist gave me an uncertain smile as she approached me while she cast nervous glances at my two bodyguards flanking the door.

“I’m sorry for this,” I said with a nod toward my entourage.

“It’s all right. I suppose you have a reason to have them with you. How can I help you?”

I scanned the flowers. “I want a big bouquet that brings light into a dark room. But…” I hesitated. “I want to bind the bouquet myself. I used to work in a flower shop, and I really miss it. I’ll pay you as if you’d bound it, of course.”

The florist’s eyes widened, but then she smiled. “If you need help, don’t hesitate to ask me. I’ll show you around.”

She showed me her workplace, with everything I’d need for pruning and binding, before she stepped back and let me peruse the flowers. My worries for Nestore made it hard to channel my inner florist.

“What kind of light are you aiming for?” the florist asked eventually.

I paused in front of a vase with white freesia. “Fresh morning light.”

She smiled. “Might I suggest a color scheme of white, lemon, and light green?”

My face broke into a smile. “Yes.” I chose a few white freesias, light green hydrangeas, Gerbera daisies in lemon yellow, and soft yellow snapdragons, then moved toward the work table and began binding them. When I emerged from the shop thirty minutes later, I felt a little lighter. The bouquet seemed to catch the light and intensify it. Perfect for the mansion’s lingering darkness.

I took another whiff of my bouquet as I settled on the back seat of the limousine. After a few minutes of driving, my bodyguards abruptly stopped talking. I glanced up, trying to gauge their mood. Their expressions were tense and determined, their jaws locked as they alternated between glancing into the side and back mirrors. I turned around in my seat to see the reason for their worry. A massive black pickup was cutting through traffic to stay close to us.

“We’re being followed.”

Silence was the answer.

“Who are they?”

Rodolfo cleared his throat as he turned a corner, then another, picking up speed but not racing. Traffic was dense but not as bad as during rush hour. “They could be from the Bratva. There was a recent altercation with them, so this might be them out for retribution.”

“So you don’t think they could be old followers of my father?”

“They usually go about their attacks in secret. This open threat reeks like Bratva.”

“They’re gone,” the other bodyguard said to Rodolfo. I kept forgetting his name. He seldom talked to me.

I slanted another look over my shoulder. The pickup was indeed gone. “Do you think they gave up because of traffic?”

“No,” Rodolfo muttered. “This was their warning. They’ll attack at a later time. Let’s get you back inside the walls of Romano Manor.”

“Do you have a way to contact my husband to let him know?”

“Maybe.”

It was obvious he didn’t want to tell me more. Did Nestore tell him to do that? Maybe he was angrier than I’d thought. He really needed some distance. My other bodyguard typed something on his phone, probably a message for Nestore. Or maybe he contacted Niccolo. I didn’t have his number. I definitely needed to change that.

Back at the manor, I placed the bouquet in a crystal vase and set it in the center of the dining table. Smiling, I headed into the kitchen for an afternoon snack. I was surprised to find Sasha, the man who tended to the wild cats, and a very young, unknown man inside the kitchen, stashing meat and bones into a large crate under the cook’s watchful gaze.

“Are you going to feed the wildcats?” I asked. “I would love to join you.”

“You can come along if you like. It’ll be a blast,” the younger man said with a too-familiar smile. I didn’t care, but Nestore definitely wouldn’t have appreciated his expression. We were the same age, so maybe that’s why he thought he could talk to me like a friend.

Sasha gave him a hard look. “This is my nephew Lev. He’s new here and obviously unaware of the rules. “We can feed the cheetahs and tiger if you like. The lions already had their meal, Mrs. Romano.”

“I have no other plans, so I’d love to. Let me put on more sensible shoes.” I quickly dashed into the cloakroom and changed into a pair of

white sneakers. They'd get dirty too, but they were a better choice than the white and gold sandals, pumps, and ballerina flats I owned.

Sasha and Lev waited for me at the back entrance of the kitchen. I had never left the house through it and was surprised to find our garbage cans as well as a small herb and vegetable garden hidden behind a wooden fence. I followed the two men down the pathway toward the enclosures. Sasha must have chided his nephew because he didn't try talking to me again.

We went into the cheetah house first. Lev shoved up his sleeves and began to load the chunks of meat onto the chopping board. My eyes lingered on the bruising in the crook of both his arms. Sasha took out bottles with food supplements for the animals, then turned. His eyes darted to the bruises, and his face fell. He stalked toward Lev and gripped him by the scruff. He growled something in Russian under his breath. Nestore had mentioned that he was half Russian and half Italian. Lev ripped away and reached for the wooden meat tenderizer beside the chopping board.

I screamed a warning, but it was too late. Lev hit Sasha over the head with it. He sagged to the floor. I couldn't tell if he was dead, and I didn't have time to find out because Lev turned his attention to me. With the tenderizer in one hand, Lev advanced on me.

"My husband will kill you in the most brutal way possible if you hurt me," I warned him as I backed away.

"Your husband isn't here, and he'll think you ran off. The cats will eat your corpse, and by the time the Bratva delivers your smashed-in head to him, I'll be in the Caribbean with a never-ending supply of cocaine and girls."

Was he going to kill me with the tenderizer? Not the most painless death. My heart thundered in my chest as fear tightened my muscles. But I wasn't a stranger to fear or pain, and I definitely wouldn't let this junkie smash my skull in.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The meat tenderizer raised above his head, Lev cornered me. He cut off my way to the only door of the house. I moved sideways, trying to come up with a plan. “What about Sasha?”

“The cats will eat him, too.”

“He’s your uncle,” I said, appalled. Not that I wasn’t familiar with cruelty within the closest family.

“My family despises me for doing drugs. They keep locking me up in rehab facilities.”

“Because they care.”

He grinned. “You can stop talking. I won’t spare you. This is the deal of a lifetime.”

My gaze crossed the hooks dangling from the ceiling. They looked sturdy enough to carry a huge chunk of meat, even if I’d only seen them with rabbits. Lev wasn’t very tall, and he was lanky. The hooks might carry him. But how would I attach him to the hook?

I backed away toward the wall panel that operated the flap and the hooks, then climbed the step toward the elevated platform.

“You can’t run,” he said with a sneer.

“I don’t want to,” I said, with a hard smile, which caught him off guard. He paused briefly, then raised the tenderizer over his head. He wore a wide leather wristband on his raised arm. This might work. When he stood right in front of the platform, I used my chance and jumped at him. But the momentum and his lack of strength sent us toppling backward and slamming into the wall. Despite his lankiness, he was stronger than me, but he was obviously not used to fighting. I sank my teeth into his cheek as hard as I could, drawing blood but pulling back before I tore his flesh off. He screeched and covered his cheek with his free hand. I snatched at the hook. I could only move it about ten inches down by the tight wire rope. Using his moment of agony, I gripped his arm with both hands and slid the leather wristband over the hook. His eyes shot open, and he stared up at his hand still holding the meat tenderizer, now attached to the hook. He lashed out at me, but I stumbled back before he could reach me and slammed my fingers down on the two buttons that Nestore had used to open the flap and move the hooks.

With a groan, the steel flap at the top slid open, and the hook began moving, dragging Lev backward with it. Unfortunately for him, the opening near the ceiling meant he slammed into the wall. The hook creaked, the engine roared, then it jerked Lev off his feet. The angle at which his arm hit the edge of the opening twisted it, and a sickening crunch sounded. Lev’s face filled with agony, but any sound was knocked out of him as the wire moved farther and dragged his body up and then through the opening. I hurried toward the window to watch as he dropped down, still dangling from the hook by the leather wristband. His arm was twisted at the elbow, his shoulder was luxated, and his wrist was bleeding from an open fracture. His feet and knees slid over the ground as the machine dragged him through the enclosure. He screamed and tried to get his footing—to no avail.

The cheetahs had abandoned their hunt and trotted after him, obviously unsure what to do with their unusual prey. Cheetahs were too shy of humans. I wished he were in the tiger habitat. I paused, stunned by my vengeful thoughts, but I realized I didn’t feel any pity for the man who had tried to kill me brutally so he could have a lifetime supply of drugs. And not just me, but also his uncle.

I chanced a look over my shoulder at Sasha's still unmoving form. Hopping off the platform, I moved to his side and got down on my haunches, then pressed my fingers to his throat. I immediately found his pulse. After years of checking on Nestore in the same manner, I was an expert. Blood trickled from a laceration at his hairline above his forehead, and a fat lump was forming. That he was alive didn't mean he'd stay alive. A head injury was no joke.

I reached for the walkie-talkie attached to the back of his belt. I had never used one before, but I had watched the staff doing it on occasion. I pressed a big button on the side that I'd seen others use before they spoke into the walkie-talkie. "This is Amelia Romano. I'm in the cheetah house. Sasha and I were attacked by his nephew. He needs reinforcements."

The line crackled, then a distorted voice sounded. "Reinforcements are on the way. Get to safety."

I glanced over my shoulder into the enclosure, where Lev was still being dragged around in a wide circle. He was crying. He wasn't even trying to remove his wristband or get off the hook in another fashion. How could he give up this quickly?

His bad. His death wouldn't be pleasant.

Sasha groaned.

"Hey," I said quietly. "Don't move. You have a head injury."

Sasha's eyes slid open, then widened. He grimaced, his eyes going cross for an instant before they focused on me once more. He tried to get his arm under himself to push up, but failed. "Don't move!" I ordered. "You'll make it worse."

"I need to protect you."

I let out a laugh. "It's a little too late for that. I handled your nephew." I pointed toward the enclosure, and Sasha followed my gaze. He sagged back. "That's why he made you his wife."

I pursed my lips but didn't have time to dwell on the comment as the door to the enclosure slammed open and four armed guards stormed in. Rodolfo rushed to my side and pulled me to my feet.

"I'm safe," I said, a little annoyed. "He's inside the enclosure."

Rodolfo still held my wrist as he scanned the enclosure. Lev was at the very end, but slowly the machine dragged him back toward the window.

“Let her go,” said a deep, familiar voice that warmed my belly. My eyes darted to the door, where Nestore towered in black clothes, a fur coat, and a bone crown.

Rodolfo released me when Nestore stalked into the room and cradled my face in his scarred palms. His expression was haunted. “I left you, and you almost died.”

“I’m alive.”

He shook his head with a growl. “I would have never forgiven myself.”

“I handled it.”

“But you shouldn’t have had to. I promised myself you’d be safe from violence.” He brushed his thumb across my lips, then showed me the blood.

“It’s not mine,” I said. “I bit his cheek to startle him.”

It was only then that I tasted the metallic tang of blood in my mouth. Nestore bent down and kissed my forehead, then each of my cheeks, and lastly my lips. “Never again will I allow someone to get this close to hurting you. Never.” His voice rang with viciousness as he stepped back and turned toward his men. “Why did he get close to killing my wife?”

Rodolfo lowered his head. “She wanted to feed the wildcats with Sasha and his new helper. You know, his nephew.”

Nestore’s eyes slanted to Sasha, who stilled, resignation filling his gaze as if he knew this was his death sentence. “You vouched for him.”

“I thought he was clean… I’m sorry, sir.”

Nestore’s expression remained cold and pitiless. He moved toward the glass when Lev was dragged past it. “The cheetahs don’t know what to do with him. Maybe they need a little encouragement.”

“Aren’t you going to question him?” Rodolfo asked.

Nestore took a knife from his holder and threw it at the man. The blade impaled itself in his shoulder. Rodolfo cried out and gripped the handle, his skin becoming pale.

“Never doubt me again,” Nestore snarled, then held out his hand. “I need my knife back.”

Rodolfo curled his fingers around the handle, his face scrunching up with agony, and perspiration shining on his forehead. He pulled the blade out, then sagged to his knees. With a trembling hand, he held up the blood-covered knife. Nestore took it from him, then held out his free hand for me. I put mine into his, and he led me out toward a door in the fencing around

the enclosure. He unlocked it with a key dangling from a small key chain in his pocket. “Do you want to join me?”

I nodded. He gave me a slight smile and led me into the enclosure. The cheetahs raised their head and looked our way, but they didn’t come closer. They had lost interest in Lev.

Nestore made a slashing motion at the window, and the machine stopped. Lev looked our way, and his eyes grew wide when he spotted Nestore. He wound himself and then cried out in pain. Nestore shook his head as he led me toward the dangling Lev.

“You broke your arm and wrist in several places. This must be painful,” Nestore said matter-of-factly.

“Yes,” Lev gasped, his expression lighting up with hope as if he thought Nestore pitied him.

I almost rolled my eyes at him.

“The pain you’re feeling now is nothing compared to the agony I’ll inflict on you for attacking my wife.”

Lev blinked, then stilled like a scared mouse when Nestore stopped in front of him. Disgust and rage twisted Nestore’s regal features. “Pathetic. You really thought you could kill a Romano? The woman destined to be at my side?”

Lev didn’t say anything. His pants turned dark in the crotch area as he peed himself.

Nestore’s lips curled. “Let’s see if we can make the cheetahs take notice.”

Nestore bent forward and sliced his blade along Lev’s calf in several fast, slashing motions. Lev jerked and screamed. Nestore motioned toward the window, and the steel wire began moving again, dragging Lev behind. The gashes in his calf dripped blood on the ground.

The cheetahs sniffed the air, and finally, one of them began to trot after Lev.

I watched the elegant cat as it sniffed at Lev’s leg. He screamed and kicked out. The animal was too quick but obviously didn’t like resisting prey.

“I guess you’ll have to toss him into the tiger enclosure,” I said.

Nestore turned to me with a curious look.

I shrugged. “He tried to butcher me with a meat tenderizer.”

Nestore’s eyes flickered with bloodlust, and his answering smile scared even me a little. “I need to get a few answers out of him before the tiger enjoys him. He tends to kill them before I can question them.”

“He said the Bratva told him to kill me.”

Nestore nodded. “I want more names, and I want to make him pay for what he’s done.” He cupped my cheek. “Go, dove. I don’t want you to watch. You’ve seen too much blood in your life.”

“I can handle blood,” I reminded him.

“I know. Nobody knows it better than me.”

I stood on my tiptoes and kissed his lips. “I’ll be waiting for you. Come back to me soon.”

“Trust me, I need your closeness more than you can fathom.”

He kissed me again, then stepped back. I turned around and left the enclosure. Rodolfo, pressing a hand against his shoulder wound, and two other guards joined me as I walked up the path toward the house. I glanced at Rodolfo. “Shouldn’t you get this treated? You’re bleeding a lot.” The entire left side of his shirt was covered in blood.

He grimaced. “Your safety is my top priority, or my life is forfeit.”

A sudden fear struck me. “Did someone alert Flavia’s bodyguards? The Bratva could target them as well.”

“They were notified,” Rodolfo said in a tight voice. I still made a mental note to call her as soon as I got my phone. On my way to the primary bedroom, I grabbed the vase with the bouquet. I needed something to lighten my mood. I put it down on the small side table beside the sofa, then grabbed my phone from the nightstand and sank onto the sofa. I called Flavia, but as Rodolfo had said, she was safe and had additional security for the time being.

I moved into the bathroom to shower away the memories of what had happened. A glance at my face revealed the skin right beneath my lower lip was still tinged red from biting Lev.

Maybe I wasn’t so different from Nestore. The time in the basement had shaped us both, but I could hide the effects better.

I dragged a limp Lev by the meat hook wedged into his shoulder toward the tiger enclosure. He was whimpering but otherwise not moving. The last hour in my hands, he'd learned the true meaning of agony, and I made his withdrawal symptoms seem like a walk in the fucking park. I couldn't believe this worthless piece of shit had dared to attack Amelia.

I shouldn't have left her this long. I had been filled with the need to destroy, to overcome this feeling of powerlessness I had had since Achille's death, but I should have returned to her sooner. She was my wife. She was my everything. If something had happened to her…

I jerked at the hook, and Lev's eyes jerked open, then rolled back again. He was a wimp. The tiger watched me from its resting place on a boulder. He'd enjoy this extensive meal. I unlocked the door in the fence, then ripped the hook out of Lev's shoulder before I shoved him inside and locked him in.

He landed on his knees, gasping in pain as he grabbed his broken ribs. Three of his fingers were missing. I took them out of my pants pocket and tossed them into the enclosure as a treat. Lev's expression twisted, and he threw up. He had already done so twice, and only foam tinged red with blood came out. The tiger stretched leisurely, then hopped off the boulder.

Lev crawled toward the fence. "Please! Please! I'll do anything to make you forgive me. Just tell me what to do."

"Die," I said.

The tiger began running, then, with a jump, it sank its teeth into Lev's bleeding calf and dragged him backward. Lev's fingers flailed over the grass. I watched for the next fifteen minutes as the tiger enjoyed its treat and Lev wished for death. When his neck snapped, I turned and left.

I needed to make sure the Bratva regretted the day they decided to kill Amelia. Sure, I had killed ten of their men brutally, but attacking my wife? That went beyond simple retribution.

I loathed the idea of leaving Amelia even for a second, but I needed to make sure she was safe, and that meant I had to erase any thought of Amelia from my enemies' minds. They needed to dread her name. Once I was done with the mediocre Pakhan in Los Angeles, even the Bratva would know that Amelia was on a pedestal.

Amelia sat on the sofa in our bedroom when I entered. She was dressed in a soft-looking white knit dress and barefoot. I wanted nothing more than to kiss her and pull her into my arms, but covered in blood as I was, it was out of the question.

"He's dead," I said. She gave a small nod. In her lap, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* was open. It had become her comfort read, like it was mine. I moved into the bathroom and took a quick shower before I returned to the bedroom. I held out my hand, and Amelia allowed me to pull her to her feet. I wrapped my arms around her and buried my nose in her hair. The residual anger I'd still felt toward her because she'd killed her father was gone. The moment I'd heard of the danger she'd been in, my worry and fear had trumped everything else.

"Are you still mad?" she whispered against my bare chest.

"No. I'm not. I'm mad at your father because I never managed to get even with him."

"You wouldn't have ever felt like you did, no matter how long you tortured him."

My heart clenched. "I know."

She sighed, and I tightened my hold further. "I need to leave in the morning to deal with the Bratva, dove. I can't allow them to think they can attack you without raising hell."

"But you're staying the night?" She sounded hopeful, but also scared.

"I'll stay until the sunrise." I kissed her gently.

We settled into the bed together. Amelia motioned at a bouquet I hadn't noticed before. It was white and yellow and light green. I didn't recognize the flowers.

"I bound it. I miss working with flowers."

"Then plant flowers in the garden. There's enough space. You can decorate the house with the flowers you grow."

"I wasn't sure if you'd be okay with me changing anything." She pursed her lips.

"You can change everything but the maze."

She smiled and pressed her face against my chest. "Do you want me to read you *The Tale of Peter Rabbit?"* I asked when I realized Amelia was still holding it.

"Yes, please," she said quietly.

Before I began reading, I asked her, "Will you be all right?"

"I don't feel sorry for him, if that's what you're worried about."

"You almost got killed," I reminded her. Maybe she didn't realize how close she'd gotten to dying. I certainly hadn't forgotten the entire time I'd tortured her attacker.

"Maybe I'm simply used to being at risk of dying. The time in the basement messed with my mind, too."

I kissed the top of her head. "Your mind is as beautiful as your body."

"My mind can be a cruel, dark place, too. Not often, but there's potential for it."

I sighed. "I love even the darkness of your soul, even if I wish it had never been tainted."

She swallowed thickly. "I love you too."

My heart galloped in my chest. I focused on the pages of the book in front of me, not wanting to dwell on my softer emotions. I needed to focus on the rage deep inside me if I wanted to make tomorrow the darkest day in the LA Bratva's history.

After ten minutes of my reading, Amelia's breathing evened out. I put the book on the nightstand and grabbed my phone to tell Niccolo about my plan. He needed to get the ball rolling and call in our soldiers so we could ambush every Bratva establishment in the city. I would seek out the Pakhan personally and make him wish he had never been born. His skull would be the crowning piece in my trophy gallery.

The dark plumes of smoke rising from the Pakhan's villa rose into the baby-blue sky. I stuffed his skull into the gym bag I'd taken with me for that purpose. I'd bring it to my preparator. He'd worked on all of my trophies and did marvelous work. By now, he hardly blinked when I took human remains to him.

"Did you send Remo a copy of the video that we sent to every Pakhan in Camorra territory?"

Niccolo looked up from his phone, then glanced past the gates toward the street. Sirens were coming closer. "We should leave."

Taking the gym bag, I got into Niccolo's car, and he took his seat behind the steering wheel. The fire trucks and police cars arrived in the street when we turned the corner.

"I sent Remo everything. He hasn't reacted so far."

"Drop me off at home, and take the head to Freddy."

Niccolo's lips curled. "Not sure why you want the ugly face of the Russian in your home."

"I skinned him. His face was eaten by the pit bulls he kept as pets."

"You know what I mean."

I ignored him. The skull would make a fabulous trophy, and my enemies would fear me even more for having it.

My phone rang. I didn't have to look at the screen to know it was Remo.

"You sure know how to piss off the Russians," Remo said by way of greeting.

"Mainly, I know how to make sure they never dare to set a toe out of line again."

"Yakov certainly won't, considering you cut them all off."

"I also skinned, gutted, and decapitated him."

"Indeed. I watched the entire video. Of course, I fast-forwarded the less interesting parts. I never understood why Nino favored skinning our enemies. I prefer less arduous ways to cause agony. You apparently have attention to detail like my brother."

“I wanted to make a statement they understood.”

“I’m sure they did. It never gets boring with you. That’s for sure.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

Remo chuckled, then he hung up.

“Let me guess, he’s happy with your work?”

“I wouldn’t call any of Remo’s states of mind happy, but he appreciated my work.”

Niccolo scoffed and shook his head, shooting me a sideways glance. “You look like you went to hell and came back.”

“Not for the first time.”

“And probably not for the last time either,” Niccolo muttered.

He was right, but now all I wanted was to find solace in the arms of my personal paradise: Amelia.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

After breakfast alone because Nestore had already set out to get retribution on the Bratva, I told my bodyguards to drive me to Flavia and Luciano for lunch. I needed a distraction, or my worry for Nestore would drive me crazy.

It barely worked, and I kept checking my phone, but Nestore simply wasn't someone who texted cute messages or even notices of his survival.

In the late afternoon, when I still hadn't heard from Nestore, I decided to return to the mansion.

When we pulled up in the driveway, my breath halted in my throat. Nestore stood in the center of the staircase, unmoving, his gaze distant. He was naked except for boxers, the bone crown, and his fur coat, but his skin was covered in blood and dirt. I got out of the car, but my bodyguards didn't. They pulled away slowly and parked the car down the small slope, which was probably a clever decision on their part. I took a deep breath and watched him in silence. He knew I was there, watching him, but he didn't acknowledge me.

He looked regal, not because of the fur coat or bone crown. His face had always reminded me of a prince, and his gaze now, as he regarded the premises of his manor, only manifested that impression. I had a feeling I knew why he was covered in blood, but I didn't dare ask. Just like I'd never ask him where the last remains of my father rested. I didn't want to know.

I took one step after the other closer to him, and finally, his gaze settled on me. The rage and chaos in his eyes were gone. They weren't calm or peaceful, but as if he had arrived.

I stopped on the step beside him. I waited for him to say something. I didn't want to break the silence, not if he needed it to gather his thoughts.

Nestore smiled in a strange way—a little sad, and a little wistful. "When I'm with you, I remember him. In the eternal darkness of my existence, you shine a light on the terrified boy hiding in the darkest corner of my soul. I won't lie to you. What's left of him won't ever come out again."

I nodded, because I knew. Sometimes I'd tried to lie to myself, but I was done lying. I needed to face the truth so Nestore and I could build a future together. "He deserves to rest," I whispered, tears clogging up my throat.

Nestore cupped my cheeks with scarred palms, his dark eyes full of dread. "Will you ever love the man I've become?"

Tears flooded my eyes because the little girl Amelia in the first photo with Nestore would have said no without hesitation. There was no hesitation as I spoke now either. "I already do."

He kissed me harshly, but eventually his touch became sweeter, less desperate, almost accepting.

He removed his fur coat and covered me in it, then he put his bone crown on my head. He fell to his knees and pressed his mouth to my belly, then tilted his head up to meet my gaze. "You are my queen, Amelia. You are the only reason my heart is still beating. You are the reason I remember I'm human, not a mere beast. I want you to reign over our city by my side."

My heart swelled with love. I sank down and wrapped my arms around Nestore.

"I'm covered in blood, dove," he rasped.

"I don't care." I held him tighter. I breathed in his very own spicy, musky scent, which mixed with the metallic tang of blood. It was a familiar scent. One I didn't fear or abhor.

I hooked my arms around his neck and pulled him down for another kiss. He breathed raggedly, his eyes full of longing and need.

I pushed to my feet and held out my hand. “Come.”

He put his hand in mine and stood, then followed me inside. We didn’t speak. I led him into our bathroom and turned on the water in the shower. Nestore helped me out of his coat and my now blood-smeared clothes. Then we stepped into the shower together. He had a gash below his rib that I only noticed now that the water washed away the dried blood.

We helped each other clean, then towel dried before I led Nestore toward our bed. He put down the bone crown on the nightstand, then I made him stretch out on top of the covers. My eyes took in his muscled body, the many scars that only made him more attractive to me.

This was the first time we’d be intimate since I knew he was as much mine as I was. I wanted to appreciate every inch of him as he always did me. I climbed on the bed and kissed his cheek, then his chest, swiping my tongue over his nipple before I moved lower, allowing my lips to gently skim his scars. His breathing deepened as I trailed down his six-pack to his pelvis. His cock was slowly hardening, and my own body responded with need at the sight. But I wanted us to go slow today. I wanted us to really worship each other.

I curled my fingers around his length, then swirled my tongue around its tip. I cast my eyes up when I sucked the head into my mouth. Nestore watched me in rapt attention, his expression twisting with lust and appreciation. He cupped my head, but not to steer my movement. The touch was gentle. I knew it wouldn’t always be like this, and I didn’t want it to be. I wanted to be dominated and ravaged, but now and then, I also wanted us to make love.

I sucked him deeper into my mouth, taking my time, enjoying the saltiness in my mouth and the way his stomach hollowed when his tip hit the back of my throat. I didn’t go further. Instead, I established a slow rhythm of him gliding in and out of my mouth while my tongue teased his tip.

“I need you,” Nestore murmured.

I drew back and slid a hand between my legs to test my readiness. I was slick from giving him head.

Nestore grabbed my hand and pulled it away. “Let me taste you first.”

I nodded. He tugged me toward his face, gripped my hips, and helped me position myself above his head. I gripped the headrest, suddenly shy.

Nestore didn't pull me down. He didn't dominate this time. "Take from me what you need."

I swallowed thickly, my clit swelling with need. I released a deep breath and slowly lowered my hips until my pussy touched Nestore's lips. They parted, and his tongue darted out. I threw my head back, my fingers clenching as he sucked my clit. Then he stopped, and he nudged me with the tip of his tongue invitingly. "Take your pleasure. Tonight I'm at your mercy, dove. Ride my tongue."

I lowered my hands to his head and cupped his sides, then I began to move my pelvis back and forth so his tongue slid over the length of my pussy. I kept his head steady as I ground myself against his tongue and lips. He watched me with rapt attention and so much adoration that my heart threatened to explode with love. My clit throbbed with every brush of his tongue, but it wasn't enough. I needed more. "I need your fingers," I pressed out.

Nestore's palms ghosted down my back over the curve of my ass, and then he slid one of them between my legs and entered me with two fingers. I rotated my hips, driving his fingers deeply into me and pressing my clit against his tongue.

I was close, so very close. His thumb pushed into my back entrance, and I exploded on top of him, crying out his name.

I trembled on top of him, overwhelmed and sated. When the sensations became too much, I lifted my hips. He slid his fingers out of me but kept caressing me with his tongue. His eyes locked on mine as he kissed my pussy.

I licked my lips. His eyes darkened with his own need. I lifted myself higher, then I slid down his body. His chin and cheeks glistened with my release, and his lips were swollen from giving me pleasure. I flushed even as the sight turned me on. I reached behind myself and gripped his cock. It was hot and hard. My lips fell open when I slid his thick tip into my pussy. His size was always uncomfortable at first, but then it made me sore in the best way possible.

I lowered myself all the way down his cock until my pussy pressed against his pelvis. Then I straightened and simply basked in the sensation of

being filled with Nestore’s cock. Nestore reached for the bone crown and then held it out to me.

I took it and put it on my head, then began to move my hips slowly. Every time my pussy ground down against his pelvis, sparks filled my body. His tip hit a spot deep in my channel that curled my toes. The pleasure was deeper, more lasting, and I couldn’t get enough of it. Nestore gripped my hips, then slowly slid up until he cupped my breasts. His fingers pinched my nipples, then twirled them gently between his pads.

I moaned and clenched around him, causing him to toss his head back and let out a low moan in turn. I smiled. My pleasure built up, even if I didn’t speed up. Nestore’s fingers twitched against my breasts, and his breathing turned raspy.

“I want us to come together,” I whispered.

“Then let loose. I’m ready when you are.”

I lifted myself all the way up until only his tip remained in me, then slammed down and rode him in an erratic, needy pace. Pleasure rippled from my core through every inch of my body until I fell back. Nestore’s hands caught me around the waist, and he took over, driving his cock up into me through my release. His own orgasm erupted deep inside me, making me shudder with another release. The slapping sound of Nestore’s pelvis hitting my pussy subsided as he slowed. I sagged forward and pressed my face into the crook of his neck, feeling his last twitches in my channel before he softened.

Nestore kissed my temple and stroked his palm over the scars on my back.

“Everything I endured was worth it because it brought me here.”

I nodded. “I love you.”

Nestore shuddered. “My love for you has been the anchor in my life, dove.”

When I woke without Nestore by my side, I immediately sat up and got out of bed. After a moment, I remembered that he couldn't be with my father anymore. The man was gone. I was drawn to the window overlooking the garden. It didn't take me long to find Nestore. He stood in front of the entrance to the maze. He was completely naked except for his fur coat and held something long in his hand that I couldn't make out from this far away. Grabbing my bathrobe in passing, I hurried out of the room. My body still sang with what we had done in the past four hours. After our first lovemaking, Nestore had taken back the reins and given me more pleasure than I thought I could handle. Now I was sore in every area of my body.

As I rushed down the many stairs, I put the robe on. As expected, it was cold outside, and I shivered when my bare feet touched the grass. I followed Nestore down the accurate pathway toward the maze. He was still where I'd last seen him, appearing almost frozen.

I touched his back, feeling him stiffen under the thick fur. It felt soft and warm under my touch, so unlike his wearer's expression. Nestore tilted his head down to me, a frown pulling down his brows.

"What are you doing out here?"

"I keep wondering," he says, his gaze returning to the arched entrance of the maze. The light from the lamps flanking the pathway only reached a few feet inside the maze. After that, darkness waited.

I shivered at the idea of entering the eight-foot-high rose maze. I didn't understand how I could have ever thought anything about this place was romantic.

"If your mother is buried in there?"

"She is," he said quietly, his face turning almost reluctantly toward the maze as if pulled by invisible strings. "Your father taunted me with it. During one of the torture sessions, I…I called for her." He fell silent, goose bumps rippling over his body. My skin pimpled in response, imagining what my father must have done to make Nestore cry for his mother. "After that, he kept mentioning her and told me he knew my father killed her. He buried him on top of her because it was my father's favorite position."

I shuddered.

"I can't bear the thought that she's found her last resting place beneath my father." The tortured look in his eyes made my heart clench. "I want to bury her properly. But—" He shook his head as if he was trying to free

himself from invisible reins. “I can’t bring myself to enter this fucking maze.”

He closed his eyes. I looked down at the hand holding the thing I hadn’t recognized before: a shovel.

“I’ll come with you. We can do this together.” I held out my hand despite my own anxiety at the mere idea of entering this graveyard disguised as a maze.

Nestore took my hand, expression flickering with confusion. “Why do you always want to help me?”

“Because I care. Because I can’t stop loving you. Because loving you carries me through the dark days, too.”

He exhaled, then his expression became resolute. His fingers around mine tightened, but it was a comforting touch, not the one meant to exert dominance. Side by side, we entered the narrow pathway between the rose hedgerows. Despite Nestore’s impressive height, the hedge still towered about ten inches over him. Soon, the darkness cloaked us. Nestore paused and took out his phone, then turned on the flashlight to illuminate the path ahead of us. He handed it to me and kept the shovel. I directed the beam of light to the ground so we didn’t stumble over anything. My breathing quickened as we moved deeper into the labyrinth. The thick rose bushes dimmed the noises of the outside world. The heavy sweetness of thousands of roses in bloom clung to the back of my throat, an overwhelming sensation that made me gag.

For a while, we walked side by side in silence, turning left and right. Every twist and alley looked the same as the one before. I wasn’t sure if we were circling back to the entrance or actually going somewhere.

Nestore seemed to be drawn by an invisible line as he led us deeper into the maze. To him, the chaotic uniformity of tightly woven vines made sense. In some alleys, the vines had grown out of control, narrowing the pathway. Thorns snatched at our skin and clothes, but we didn’t stop. The silence was eerie. Our feet sank into the mossy underground, untouched by sunlight. It was colder in here than in the rest of the garden. I shivered, not just from the cold, but from a feeling of utter discomfort and apprehension. Nestore slowed as we reached the center of the maze, his body growing taut. I followed his gaze toward the ground where moss grew over a slight

rise in the surface. It was bumpy, as if someone had haphazardly covered something with soil.

“Do you think this is the place?” I whispered.

Nestore nodded, his lips thinning as he stared at the spot that likely marked his mother’s last resting place. He released my hand and approached the spot, but didn’t start digging.

I hadn’t visited my mother’s grave since she’d been buried. Father had never allowed it, and it felt wrong to do it now after all this time. How did Nestore feel knowing he would have to unearth the last remains of his mom?

He moved closer, then stopped. Despite my abhorrence of graves, I moved to his side. With a low growl, he slammed the shovel into the ground and began digging. He tossed soil behind himself. When the shovel hit something more substantial than earth, he halted. I moved a step forward to get a better view just as he pushed aside some soil to reveal a bone. Nestore stared down at it, his expression hardening. The air I drew in felt heavier, earthier, and a little musty. The odor of decay was very faint, nothing compared to what I remembered from the basement.

I wished I could help, but I hadn’t thought about bringing a shovel, and I couldn’t bring myself to dig up a skeleton with my bare hands. Nestore uncovered more of the skeleton with the shovel. Soon, it became apparent that two corpses were on top of each other, one rib cage pressed against the other. My stomach sank. Why had my father tortured Nestore in this fashion, too? Couldn’t he at least have respected the dead?

Disgust for my father washed over me.

Nestore got down on his knees and began to remove the earth with his bare hands, an almost feverish look in his eyes. I directed the flashlight at the ground so he could see properly. Eventually, Nestore gripped the upper skeleton and dragged it up. The limbs remained stuck, and the skull fell off and rolled over the mossy ground. Nestore only held his father’s torso in his hands but tossed it aside with a look of disdain. He knelt again and began to separate his father’s bones from his mother’s, until only her remains lay in the grave. I ripped a few roses off the hedge and threw them into the grave with her. Nestore said she loved those roses, so it seemed fitting to bury a few with her. Nestore stayed on his knees beside the opening. I shivered when I noticed the strands of long dark hair still attached to the skull. The

top of the skull had damage, like a head injury sustained before her death. Images of her running away from an enraged man, him catching up and beating her with a heavy object, flashed through my mind. Had she died right away? Had she bled out amid the roses she loved so much? I hoped they had given her a sliver of comfort in her last moments.

Sadness overwhelmed me thinking of Nestore, who never got to say goodbye to his mother. I knew the heaviness of this grief. I'd often wondered how my life would have been with my mother in it, but she was a stranger, and my father would have only managed to make both our lives miserable. Nestore closed his eyes and lowered his head. Maybe he finally said the goodbye he was denied many years ago.

I waited patiently, without a single word, wanting to give him the chance to allow grief and find closure. Maybe this would help him.

He pushed to his feet and covered the remains with soil. "I'll have a gravestone made. She deserves a true resting place, even if I'm the only one left to grieve her."

I touched his arm. "I'll grieve her too. I'll grieve her for the mother you lost, for the love you were denied, for everything taken from you because of your father's rage."

Nestore met my gaze, warmth filling his eyes, and it nearly broke me. So often in the past few weeks, he had gazed upon me with anger and triumph, yet rarely with kindness, but here I saw my Nestore.

Nestore wrapped his arms around me, his warmth a cocoon of comfort. I inhaled his scent, now mingling with an earthy note. For a while, we stood like that, my cheek pressed against his chest, before we pulled apart, and Nestore took my hand. His gaze lingered on the grave before his focus turned to the remains of his father, carelessly tossed aside.

His expression hardened, and he swallowed before he gave a decisive nod as if he'd discussed something with himself and found a solution.

I watched as the tiger tossed my father’s skeleton through the air. He took it into the lake with him, then dove under the surface only to emerge with it in his snout again. After all the pain my father had caused my mother and me while he’d been alive, it was good to see him bring some joy to this tiger in death.

As with Achille’s remains, my men had strict instructions to dump whatever remained of his body into the ocean for it to be swept away and eaten by fish. Nobody would be mourning him.

I felt lighter now that my mother had found peace in her own grave.

When I returned to the upper part of the garden later in the morning, I found Amelia on a bench, eyes closed, her face angled toward the sunny sky, expression peaceful. It was one I never saw inside the manor, and I finally made the decision I had been too weak for years now. I didn’t move closer to my wife, not wanting to disturb her moment of peace.

Instead, I called Niccolo.

“Nestore, what can I do for you? Do you need to slaughter more Bratva assholes?”

“I need you to find a demolition company for me.”

“To demolish what exactly?”

“Romano Manor.”

Silence.

“Umm. Repeat that.”

“I want to tear down Romano Manor and fill the basement with concrete.”

“Okay,” he said slowly. “And then what?”

“Then Amelia and I will build a new palace to call our home, but first, the old place needs to go.” It would be even more splendid, created by our wishes. The men who came before me would have no say in our future.

I heard the *click click* of him typing on his laptop in the background. “All right. Are you sure?”

“I am,” I said firmly, my eyes on Amelia. She didn’t notice me yet. Maybe she was asleep. Was this the only place where nightmares didn’t haunt her?

“And where will you and Amelia live while things go down?”

I hadn’t thought about it. I just knew I needed to do this. For Amelia.

And even for me.

“We can live in the pool house.”

Nobody had used it in many years. I never went into the pool, even if I kept it running, and the staff kept cleaning the pool house and changing the linens. Everything was prepared for guests that we would never welcome.

“Well, I’m not sure about that, but I’ll give the construction company we usually work with a call. They’ll be able to help us.”

“I want the house gone by the end of the week.”

“That’s in five days.”

I hung up and moved toward Amelia. She opened her eyes when I sat beside her. “You look at peace.”

“I am, at this moment, in this place, and I feel peaceful.” She took my hand and smiled.

I brought her knuckles to my lips and kissed them. “I’ll tear down the manor. Next week, it’ll be gone, and we’ll have room to build a home without history.”

Amelia’s expression twisted with shock. “Are you serious?”

I nodded with a small smile.

She threw her arms around my neck and sobbed. I held her as she cried. “Are you happy?”

“I am. That’s why I’m crying.”

I never understood the concept of happy tears. Eventually, Amelia pulled back, her face tearstained and eyes teary. “I can’t believe it. Where

will we live?”

“In a palace of our own making.”

She sank her teeth into her lower lip and looked back toward the manor. Her smile widened. The look on her face was worth it. She and I would build a new palace worthy of our love.

Two days later, four demolition balls surrounded the manor. Staff and our bodyguards temporarily used containers for cooking and to find rest. The pool house, the security house near the gate, and the animal enclosures were the only buildings that would remain on the premises. Even the fighting pit would be torn away.

“Where will fights take place now?” Amelia asked as she leaned against me to survey the upcoming destruction.

“I’ll build a bigger and better amphitheater just on the outskirts of LA. It’ll be spectacular. You and I will get a loge with splendid thrones so the audience in the ranks and at home on their screens can fear and admire us from afar.”

She let out a laugh, then she sank her teeth into her lower lip, her gaze darting up to the bone crown atop my head. “If you create a crown for me, promise me it won’t be from bone.”

I smirked and touched her cheek. “Black onyx would suit you beautifully. The red of your hair will look like flames against it.”

“That sounds beautiful.” She narrowed her eyes in thought. “Why do you keep the bones of your enemies close? In your crown and as trophies on your walls? Why not banish them from your life for good?”

“I never understood why people thought bones were a disturbing sight. Once cleaned, the material is beautiful, which is why humans used to create art from animal bones.”

“Maybe because we prefer to bury the dead.”

“I prefer to remind myself of every enemy I killed. That way, when the nightmares become too real, I’ll know they are just the past and not my

present.”

She nodded as if she could accept that explanation. Her eyes were drawn back to the mansion just as the four wrecking balls swung toward the walls. The resulting bang let birds in the surrounding trees and rose maze shoot into the sky. Clouds of dust rose as the walls crumbled.

We watched for several hours as the place that had been our prison for many years, and in many ways, was torn down piece by piece.

I held Amelia in my arms as she cried more happy tears, and I felt lighter with every part of the house that disappeared.

Amelia had shown me photos of houses that she liked. She wanted big windows, a bedroom full of light. I wanted a place worthy of the name Romano Manor, a castle that would awe people from afar but unsettle them enough to stay away.

Five days later, like I had wanted, nothing of Romano Manor remained but a huge plain area.

“Time to rebuild our home,” I told Amelia as we headed up the slope toward the barren land from the pool house where we’d spent the past few nights.

In the following six weeks, construction workers built the house Amelia and I envisioned. A castle reminiscent of old Scottish fortresses made from basalt, granite, and slate. Two huge turrets towered on both sides of the highest floor. Windows allowed an all-around look from our bedroom in one of those turrets. While we based our design on Scottish castles, we changed the window sizes so more light would penetrate the halls and rooms. Amelia and I watched every day as our new home became a reality.

When we could enter our house for the first time, my pulse pounded in my veins like it rarely did anymore. I took Amelia’s hand as I led her through the wide wooden double door into a light-flooded entrance hall. Tall arched windows flanked the entrance door. The entrance hall was two stories tall with a glass dome that allowed sunshine to spill down. An open staircase led up to a wide gallery where my trophies were displayed. Gold, dark wood, and purple velvet dominated the insides.

The staff kitchen and the bodyguard quarters were at the very back in a separate wing. A door separated that part of the house from ours, so Amelia and I would be alone in our home most of the time. Amelia and I descended the winding staircase, arriving at a dressing room on the first landing, then

moved up farther to the huge circular bedroom in the turret. The walls were made of windows, allowing sunlight to stream in. A claw-footed copper bathtub perched beneath one of those windows. Our round bed stood in the center of the room. The purple comforter contrasted with the black wood of the bed frame and flooring. Behind the bed, a circular shower made entirely of glass allowed the person inside to look out toward the sky or the Hollywood Hills. Amelia stepped up to the window beside the bathtub, which faced the gardens.

My eyes drifted toward the place where the rose maze used to be. It had been torn away. Only one wall behind my mother's gravestone and two rose arches remained. "It feels like being in the sky," Amelia said with a pensive smile.

I nodded. The turret was the perfect place for our bedroom, above everyone else, and with a spectacular view.

Amelia beamed up at me. "I feel free. Really free, for the first time in…" She shook her head, her brows pulling together. "In forever."

I wrapped my arms around her and put my chin down on the top of her head with a small smile. "When I'm here with you, I sense peace. In the outside world, the darkness always spills forth, and I'm the raging monster everyone fears, but in our home, I'm more than a beast."

She touched my hand. "This will be our safe place, the place where you can be vulnerable and we can be us."

"Us."

I led her down to the light-flooded living room with the majestic French windows. Her eyes darted to the piano on the right. Her brows furrowed as she peered up at me.

"You don't have to play if you don't want to. I know you never enjoyed it, but…"

"I remember you telling me in the basement that you hoped to hear me play the piano one day."

I didn’t say anything. She was right, though. She licked her lips, then tugged me toward the piano. She sat on the purple leather bench but didn’t start playing. Her hands rested in her lap. She patted the spot beside her. I sank onto the bench.

Amelia placed her fingers on the keys, then closed her eyes. “It’s been a while for me.”

She started playing “Clair de lune.” I released a deep breath and relaxed. I remembered hating this song whenever my teacher forced me to play it, but listening to Amelia play it, I decided it was beautiful.

“You can join me if you want,” Amelia whispered as she glanced at me, but she never stopped playing.

I stared at the keys, then lifted my hands. The notes I played ruined the beautiful melody. I never had trouble handling a knife, but my fingers, scarred by years of torture, weren’t nimble enough to match Amelia’s skill. I jerked my hands back with a scowl. “I’m not good. I ruined the song.”

Amelia froze. “You didn’t ruin anything.” She reached for one of my hands and traced my scars with her fingertips. “I love your hands. I love how they give me pleasure, how they wipe away my tears, how they touch me as if I were the most precious thing in the world.”

“You are,” I murmured.

Amelia kissed my palm, then she returned her fingers to the keys and continued to play. “Do you want me to continue?”

“Yes.”

She held my gaze as her fingers danced over the keys. The rage and despair over my scarred hands vanished as I listened to her play. Eventually, she stopped. I cupped her cheeks and kissed her. “I imagined this moment, but my imagination failed to capture the full scope of your beauty.”

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EPILOGUE

“Did you hear?” Niccolo asked as he picked me up after my fight in the amphitheater. I had won and killed two opponents. The crowd had chanted my name, but their faces had reflected abhorrence and fear. They couldn’t stay away, even if my actions disturbed them. It was the drug of choice in their pathetic lives, a little otherworldly charm for their ordinary existence.

I slid into the passenger seat. “Did I hear what?”

“Remo Falcone got married. He now lives in Falcone manor with the Mione twin and the twins they have together.”

I frowned. Remo had kidnapped a woman from the Outfit, but he later returned her. It seemed impossible that Remo, who was like me in so many ways, managed to have a family.

“You seem surprised.”

“I am.”

“Why? If you can make a marriage work, why can’t he? You two aren’t that different.”

I nodded. He was right. But being with Amelia was one thing. She was almost a part of me, but creating life and caring for it were entirely different

matters. Amelia and I both had lost our mothers early and been subjected to brutal fathers. We didn't know the first thing about being a decent parent.

"Can you see me as a father?" I asked.

Niccolo slanted me a cautious look as he pulled up to the gates of Amelia's and my home.

"I have never thought about it. Have you?"

"No." Amelia and I had never bridged the subject either. We had spent the last three years together building a new life, a new home. Niccolo dropped me off at the base of the hill, as had become our ritual. I walked up the driveway past the sprawling flower beds that Amelia had planted herself. Dahlia, cosmea, hydrangea, sea asters, and many more flowers created an ocean of dark pink, white, lavender, and deep purple. I followed the path up to our house. Every time I caught a glimpse of the new Romano Manor, with its dark façade, arched windows, and glass dome, I let out a deep breath. I marveled at how the big windows in the front reflected the gardens, making it look as if the inside of the house, too, was filled with trees and flowers, and bushes.

I opened the door to our house, breathing in the fresh air. Maybe this was how freedom smelled; light, with a distant, flowery note. In the center of the entrance hall, a huge bouquet of dark purple dahlias and dark pink cosmea decorated a dark wood table. Flower arrangements brightened every room of the house. I took my bone crown off my head and removed the heavy fur coat, then stashed both of them in the wooden chest in the cloakroom. Those belonged to the man, the monster, outside of these walls, not to the man I allowed myself to be with only Amelia.

In black linen pants and barefoot, I walked into the living area, which seemed to be right in the garden through the two big french windows. Amelia wasn't at the piano. The piano had been an invitation, and she played every night without prompting. It was my favorite part of the day. I'd never joined her again. Hearing her play was everything I needed.

My feet relished in the softness of the dark purple rug as I crossed the distance toward the windows. One of them was open, and I went outside, following the low hum down to Amelia's newest creation: a flower bed with native wildflowers that bloomed in dark blues, steel gray, and bloodred. She stood amid the hip-high flowers and plucked the most beautiful blooms for

another bouquet. She wore a big straw hat and a flowy white dress with spaghetti straps.

Her face lit up with a smile when she spotted me, and my chest filled with peace.

The darkness always caught up with me. It was a part of me, but with Amelia, I learned to live in the light.

She held up the loosely bound bouquet. “It’s for our bedroom.”

I smiled. She never used roses for her bouquet; those were reserved for the arches around my mother’s grave. I could never look at a rose without remembering what happened to her.

She picked up the hem of her dress and stepped out of the flower bed. She was barefoot like me as she padded over to me. Her brows drew together. “You look pensive.”

“I am,” I admitted.

“Did something happen at the fights?”

I shook my head and took Amelia’s hand, pulling her against me. “I think the crowd missed your beauty. I caught several men glancing at your empty throne.”

“Next time, I’ll come again. Today, I just needed something else to banish the darkness.”

I nodded. Last night, a nightmare had woken her, sweaty and terrified. They had become rare for her, and for me too, but sometimes they caught us by surprise with their ferocity.

I kissed her, then marveled at her beauty. Could I love someone who looked like Amelia but had my blood too? Could I love a small version of myself?

“Remo has twins.”

She blinked and looked away, confusion reflecting on her face. “I’m not sure he’s someone I can see with the patience for kids.”

I shrugged and stroked her hair. “Can you envision me as a father?”

Her eyes widened. “Oh. Wow. I never really thought about it. But you take care of me. You show me love, so… why not?”

Why not. Thinking of my dark thoughts, my need for blood and gore, my impatience, and my constant need for Amelia’s body, I found many reasons. “Do you want children?”

She bit her lower lip and peered down at the flowers in her hand. “Not now. I don’t feel…” She released a breath as if she couldn’t find the right words. “I don’t feel whole enough yet. I feel like you, and I still need to work through so much before we can consider taking care of someone else. It’s not something I want to fail at.”

I nodded, relieved that Amelia felt the same way I did. “What if we’re never whole enough?”

What if I never was?

Amelia touched my cheek with a soft smile. “You’re whole enough for me, and that’s enough. Maybe we’ll never feel at a point in our lives when we’re whole enough for children, and that’s okay. I have you. I have Flavia and Luciano. My heart is full. And once I start doing the flower arrangements at Camorra weddings in the region, I’ll be very busy. My life doesn’t have a void I need to fill.”

I kissed her. She smiled against my mouth. “But maybe there’s room for something else in our lives.”

I frowned.

“Rodolfo told me one of his cats had a litter with eight babies, and he wants to get rid of them. So far, he only has a home for three of them. We have so much space. We could give the other five a home.”

“Cats,” I murmured.

“I always wanted a cat or a dog, but my father hated animals unless he could use them to show his power. And you like the lions and tiger and cheetahs.”

I chuckled at the hopefulness on Amelia’s face. “They don’t live under the same roof as we do.”

Amelia simply smiled up at me. “Cats would look great in our mansion, and in old Scottish castles, they kept the rats out.”

“We don’t have rats,” I muttered, but Amelia merely smiled. “All right. But the cats probably will avoid me. They are difficult and can sense that I’m not quite trustworthy.”

Amelia shook her head with a laugh, stepped on her toes, and kissed my cheek. “I knew you’d say that. Rodolfo is already on his way to pick them up for us.”

I sighed then smirked. I closed my fingers around Amelia’s slender throat, forcing her higher up on her toes. “You know I’ll have to punish you

for your insolence, dove. What if I'd said no?"

She shivered, her eyes glazing over with lust. "I expected you to punish me, but I knew you wouldn't say no."

Her breathless voice went straight to my dick. "Upstairs. Now."

She rushed past me, casting a glance over her shoulder before she began to run, dropping the flowers in the process. I smiled to myself as I started the chase. When I reached the winding staircase to our turret, I was already rock hard. I couldn't wait to bury myself in Amelia.

I found Amelia where I almost always did, since we'd installed the swing in one of the rose archways a couple of weeks after Rodolfo had dumped five unruly kittens in our garden.

Amelia perched sideways on the wooden board, one leg curled up, the other dangling down, while she swung gently back and forth, reading a big tome. Five cats sunbathed on the grass and pathway around her, but their heads lifted at my approach.

Amelia beamed when she spotted me.

But she wasn't the first to greet me. The biggest of the five cats, a stubborn but gentle-minded ginger, raced toward me and began to purr and press itself against my legs. I bent down and gave its head the pet it demanded, before I walked over to my wife, where she sat on the swing.

I bent down and kissed her. "How was your day?" she asked.

"Brutal, but successful," I said. Niccolo and I had killed two drug dealers who'd kept part of our money.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I shook my head. "Not now." I usually spilled the bloody details of my daily work to Amelia after I woke from a nightmare. They still came on occasion, but not as often as they used to.

Every cat except for the black male that favored Amelia sauntered up to me for a greeting. I had grown used to their furry presence and to my

surprise, their warm purring body on my lap after a particularly rough day, and before I dared to go up to Amelia, always calmed me.

Amelia chuckled when the black beast rolled over on its back, presenting its belly. “He’s jealous. That’s why he doesn’t like you.”

“I’d be jealous too if I had to watch someone else do what I do with your beautiful body every day.”

She smiled coyly up at me. “We could eat outside today. I asked the maid to set up the table beside the lake. Dinner will be ready in thirty minutes.” She patted the spot beside her on the swing. “Why don’t you join me?”

I had knelt before her while I’d eaten her out on that swing, but I’d never swung on it. “I haven’t been on a swing…since I was four or five.”

She raised her eyebrows, and I grabbed her hips and hoisted her to her feet, then sat on the swing and pulled her onto my lap. I pushed us back with my feet, then let the swing fall into a slow rhythm.

Amelia drew in a deep breath and leaned her head back against my shoulder. “Sometimes I forget the past. It’s strange and catches me by surprise every time it happens, but I love those moments.”

“I learned to focus on the moments from the past that I cherish, like when you first read T*he Tale of Peter Rabbit* to me, or when we held hands through the bars, or when you smiled at me. That makes the past seem not quite as dark.”

She nodded. “That’s true. There are moments of beauty even in our past. I wished there was a way for me to travel back in time and tell young Nestore that this would be his future, then he’d never want to give up.”

I chuckled. “But, dove, young Nestore had a vision of that future, and that’s why he survived. You embodied that vision, which was why I couldn’t let you go.”

Her eyes filled with tears, and a soft smile curled her lips. “I’m so glad you kidnapped me and made me your wife.”

I cupped her cheek and kissed her. It was one of my many sins that I regretted the least.

Amelia was my wife.

My love.

My life.

The woman who saved me every day.

The End

If you'd like to find out more about Fabiano and the Falcone brothers, check out the Camorra Chronicles!

Twisted Loyalties (Fabiano)

Twisted Emotions (Nino)

Twisted Pride (Remo)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cora is the *USA Today* and International Bestselling author of the Born in Blood Mafia Series, the Camorra Chronicles, and many other books, most of them featuring dangerously sexy bad boys. She likes her men like her martinis—dirty and strong. Her books have been translated into eighteen languages.

Cora lives in Germany with her young daughter and son, a cute but crazy Bearded Collie, as well as the cute but crazy man at her side. When she doesn't spend her days dreaming up sexy books, she plans her next travel adventure or cooks too spicy dishes from all over the world.

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